

The Hudson Review

Spring 1985 ⁸ 30/5

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Letters of Weldon Kees
New York Intellectuals in the '40s

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Monkey Park—a story

Joseph Epstein
Schlifkin on My Books—a story

Dean Flower
Nabokov's Personae

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Tall Stories and Short Hairs

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LETTER FROM LONDON BY Derwent May

REVIEWS BY Jay Parini, Robert S. Clark,
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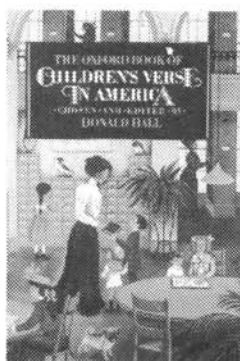


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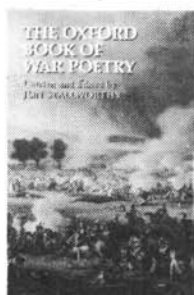
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A magazine of literature and the arts

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TO OUR READERS

With this issue, we are returning to a revised, restyled version of our "old" front cover—i.e., the one we used for the thirty-one year span between Volume IV, No. 1, Spring 1951 through Volume XXXV, No. 4, Winter 1982-83. This is in accordance with the wishes of the majority of you who responded to the appeal in our Autumn 1984 issue, in which we asked you to write us indicating your preference between the old cover and the more recent one which we used for eight issues commencing with Spring 1983, Volume XXXVI, No. 1 through Winter 1984-85, Volume XXXVII, No. 4. The voting favored the old cover by an approximately three to two margin. On the other hand, the changes we made in our interior format were widely approved and are for the most part being retained. Here is a representative sampling of opinion:

Dear Editors,

The Autumn issue asks subscribers to comment on the new cover and format. I must say that I am biased toward the old design:

1. I do not find the pastel covers pleasing. They are eye-catching, but they do not convey an immediate impression of quality and dignity—characteristics that I have long associated with *The Hudson Review*. Could you restore the darker shades?

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2. The triangular white space of the new design is certainly more dynamic than the plain white slab of the old design; however, much important information had to be sacrificed for the new look: "New work by eight poets" replaces the names of the poets themselves; "Reviews of . . ." supplants reviewers' names. Now at newsstands the curious must turn to the table of contents to help them decide whether they want to buy. I believe a print cover should give as much information as possible: it aids sales and helps prevent the dog-earing of newsstand copies.
3. The sans-serif display type is "modern" but, in my opinion, less dignified than the old type. (I was shocked when you used sans-serif type in the Winter 1983–84 issue!) Often I find it hard to read. The rule between name and title and the centering of both of these are improvements over the old layout, but I'd restore the serif typeface.
4. The new format of the table of contents is an improvement. The categorizing makes the contents easier to locate.

I hope these impressions are helpful.

Mount Kisco, New York

RICHARD FOERSTER

Dear Editor,

No, I have not liked the "new cover"—too pale, the angles not pleasing, etc. The more forthright covers did fine by me, with information of contents well displayed.

Newtonville, Massachusetts

JOHN O. PERRY

Dear Editors,

To tell you the truth, I don't like the new cover very much. The colors are weak and soft, and the design modernist in an old-fashioned way, as if a stodgy journal (which is not how I would describe *The Hudson Review*) were trying (too late) to look trendy and contemporary. It just isn't you . . . and I find your journal, but for these trifling lapses, still the best around.

Bronx, New York

RANDAL CASTLEMAN

Letter from London

DEAR H,

Well, we have a new Poet Laureate: Ted Hughes, hitherto singer of the pike's jaws and the crow's sardonic laughter, now has to celebrate royal christenings. And within four days of his appointment he did just that. He brought out a poem in the *Observer* for the christening of our young Prince Harry, the new son of the Prince and Princess of Wales, which had taken place two days before.

Capitulation to the court? Not at all. It was a brilliant stroke. For his poem was a rain-charm for that part of the country where Hughes lives, the Duchy of Cornwall, of which the monarch's eldest son—currently, the baby's father—is the official tenant, and from which he derives his income. The poem described the coming of rain after drought, and in it Hughes imagined all the rivers of the Duchy coming to life again—"the Lyn's twin gorges, clearing their throats, deepening their voices, beginning to hear each other," "the Tavy . . . rinsing its stale mouth, tasting tin, copper, ozone." It was an excellent, characteristic Hughes poem—and paid its homage to the young prince without needing even to mention him, which it didn't! In fact, one had the unworthy thought that the poem might have existed already, and merely have been renamed by the new Laureate, with its subtitle "A Blessed Devout Drench for the Christening of Prince Harry."

At any rate, an extremely confident beginning. I was reminded of a story I was told by someone at the *Times* about an earlier Poet Laureate, John Masefield. He used regularly to send rather less robust verses about royal occasions to the *Times*—but always enclosed a stamped, addressed envelope in case they should be rejected. "Real modesty," I said. "False modesty!" my informant snapped. "Of course he knew they'd be taken."

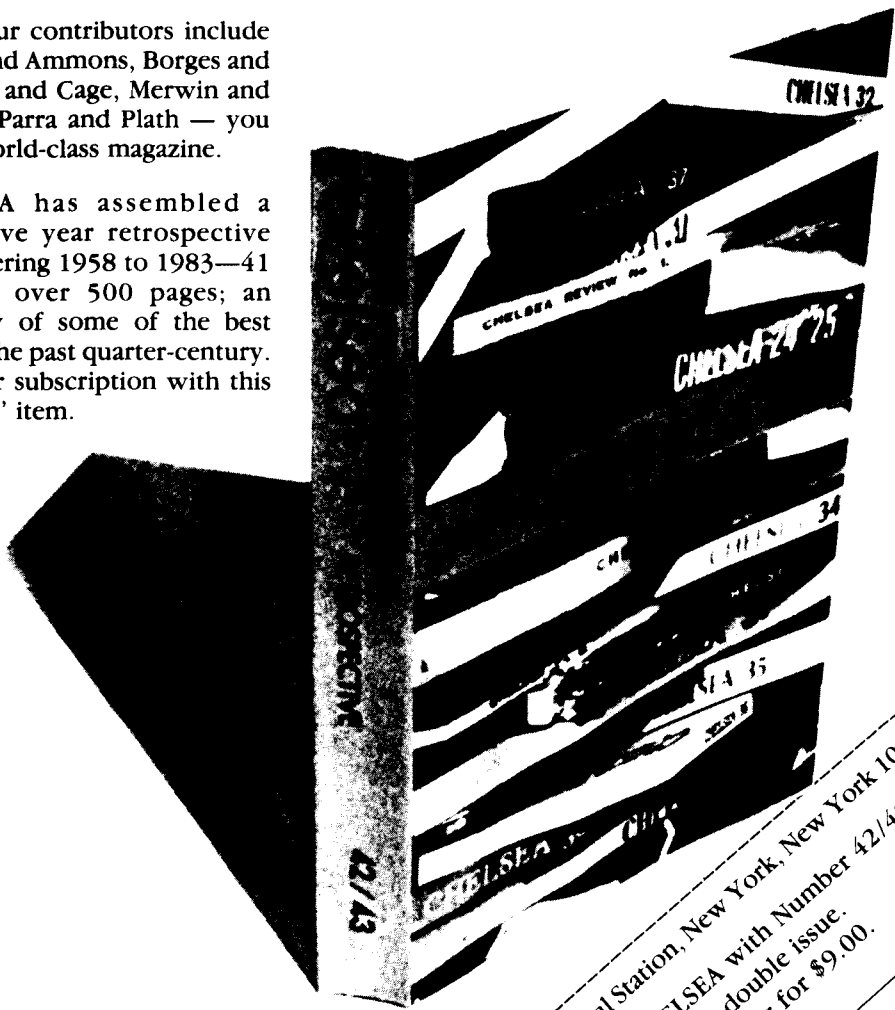
The latest Booker Prize produced some controversy, not for the first time in its life. It's now worth £15,000 to the winner, since its sponsors, the firm of Booker McConnell, wanted it to remain the largest literary prize from a financial point of view, and the Betty Trask prize I mentioned last year, for a novel of "romantic or traditional character," has been set at £12,500.

However, the Booker row was not connected with its increased monetary value, nor with the televising of the prize-giving dinner, which was the trouble last year, when the attractive newscaster brought in to interview the guests failed to recognise one of the judges, and asked her sweetly if she had read any of the novels on the short list. This year the row was over the speech by the chairman of the judges, Richard Cobb, a former professor of French his-

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tory at Oxford, who declared: "In an operation of this kind one would not go for a Proust or a Joyce—not that I would know about that, never having read either." Many people were outraged both by the implied downgrading of the ideals of the Booker Prize, and more specifically by the way in which it seemed to belittle the achievement of the prizewinner even as she was being given the prize.

The prizewinner in question was an art historian, Anita Brookner, and she got it for her novel *Hotel du Lac*. There was a general feeling that one of the shortlisted books, J. G. Ballard's *Empire of the Sun*, a semi-autobiographical novel about a young boy in a wartime prison-camp in Shanghai, was a much stronger candidate—and that it would have won if the jury had genuinely kept up its sights. Nevertheless, the remark seemed hard on Miss Brookner, whose novel is a witty and intelligent story about a woman writer who is inclined to ask rather little from life, and how she learns a few lessons—but manages to save her integrity—when she is thrown amongst a crowd of inordinately greedy men and women in a small Swiss hotel. The Booker Prize kept up its reputation for increasing the sales both of the winner and of the other books on the short list, and Miss Brookner no doubt was happy enough to see *Hotel du Lac* still well up on the bestsellers list a couple of months after the prize was given her.

Possibly more scandalous was the fact that Kingsley Amis's new novel, *Stanley and the Women*, was not even on the shortlist—and may I say that it is also a considerable shame that, as I write this, nine months after the novel was published, it has still not found a publisher in the States. The reason for this latter fact is said to be that female editors in American publishing houses are offended by it, and male editors are afraid that women won't read it.

If it's true, both those seem timid reactions to a very gifted novel. Certainly, the book is about a man who comes to feel that women think and feel so differently from men that there is no hope of any enduring, rational relationship between them. And it piles the point on thick, as the hero discovers, one after another, that all the other men he knows secretly share this conviction! But it is a very funny, dashing book—and far more subtle in its purpose than many reviewers have appreciated. For a melancholy, even tragic feeling about the dependence of men and women on each other, in spite of all their misunderstandings, surfaces again and again; and if one doesn't react hysterically to it, it is in fact rather a soothing book, a book to help one laugh at difficulties and get over them, rather than a plot to exacerbate those difficulties.

One of London's new, but already characteristic, sights has undergone a change. This is the Post Office Tower, which rises above North Soho. It's a very elegant, and somehow amusing modern

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building, with many circular platforms under the revolving top—at its foot, there is an area of small Greek restaurants, and the tower has been called the ‘kebab in the sky’. In the revolving top there used also to be a restaurant, but it was closed after some young anarchists—the now almost forgotten Angry Brigade—put a bomb in it one night. Round that top now appears, however, in bright lights, the word “TELECOM.”

The reason behind this is that the telecommunications part of the old Post Office has now been separated from it, and sold off by the Government to become a private company. The sale of the shares was part of Mrs Thatcher’s plan for turning Britain into more of a “property-owning democracy.” Every effort was made to encourage the general public to buy shares, and no one was allowed more than a few hundred. The sale was a great success, with large numbers of first-time investors joining in. But private enterprise is private enterprise, whatever the merits of Mrs Thatcher’s philosophy—and so the top of the tower has become an advertisement hoarding, much to the anger of many Londoners.

The threat of invading advertisements is also being experienced by another national institution, the BBC. The BBC is a very peculiar organisation, both in its status and its financing. It is a national body, set up by Parliament and answerable in the last resort to Parliament; but the government of the day has no means of influencing its policies—or its politics. Its charter requires it to maintain a balance in its presentation of politically controversial subjects—but no government minister can intervene to see that it does (or that it doesn’t). Also, it is financed by a license fee, which all owners of television sets are required by law to buy. But this is not a tax—the money goes direct to the BBC without passing through government hands. The other national broadcasting organisation, Independent Television, is financed by advertising. However, you can’t just opt out of BBC viewing and watch ITV for nothing—because you will still need to have a television set.

It can be imagined that every time the BBC turns to the Government for an increase in the license fee—and this is one moment when the Government can exert some power—there is an outcry from some people, “Why not make the BBC take advertising?.” This year, the outcry has been louder than ever. Advertising agencies have been particularly vociferous, because they know that with more advertising air-time available, they could probably bargain the price down. And the Government has been showing some sympathy towards the idea.

But most people believe that such a change would be a serious blow to British broadcasting. As it is, the BBC has felt for some while that it must achieve audience ratings not too far below ITV’s—or even higher, if possible without other loss—in order not to give its critics the chance to say “Look, people aren’t watching the

GRAND STREET

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BBC anymore.” For that reason it has brought in expensive popular films, and worked hard to produce popular sports programmes and comedy series, for example. Yet if it was forced to maintain itself financially by getting ads, the ratings would become an overwhelming preoccupation—and whatever resistance there might be within the BBC, the temptation to go for cheap popularity would be even greater. Even the ITV companies concede that the BBC, with its public obligation to maintain high standards, has been a source of inspiration to their own producers and programme-makers who want to do ambitious and excellent work. (Though another reason, I’m afraid, for their not wanting the Beeb to take ads is precisely the fear that their own revenue would go down.) Anyway, battle is joined—and I think the standard of British broadcasting depends in part on the outcome.

Last summer I got far away from such problems—first to the Outer Hebrides, then still further north to Iceland. The Scottish islands are not so cut off as they were, since there is a military airport on one island, Benbecula, to which a British Airways plane also comes each day. However, I went by the old route, through the Scottish Highlands, over by ferry to the Isle of Skye (which is one of the Inner Hebrides), then by another ferry over to the island of North Uist—thirty miles across, with the herring gulls keeping the boat company all the way.

On North Uist, which is quite a big island, there is no transport except the Post Office buses: the post vans, in other words, which have a few seats in the back, and will take passengers who are prepared to go all round the little farms, or “crofts,” while the postman delivers the mail. I got to know these postmen quite well! The islands are a bleak jigsaw of moor and mountain and loch in the centre, with a narrow strip of sandy meadow all round the coasts—the machair, as it’s called. The crofters still live by a mixture of sheep-farming (with a few of the shaggy Highland cattle thrown in) and fishing and peat-cutting, doubling up with the odd administrative job if they can get hold of one.

I was mainly on a bird-watching trip, and I stayed in the crofters houses, where I was very well looked after. But in the end I got into a row with the crofters. A lot of European Economic Community money has lately been poured into the islands, and I don’t think it has been very well spent. Thousands of miles of new, grey wire fencing has gone up, criss-crossing the meadows and the lower moors. It’s ugly, and it appears to keep nothing in and no one out—except the odd bird-watcher, like me, who nevertheless managed generally to struggle over it. More seriously, there has been a move to drain some of the wetter meadows, and make them suitable for crops. Here, the economic gain is likely to be very small, while the loss of bird life and flowers would be serious. I wrote an article

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in the *Times* about this when I got back to London. But I got a thunderously abusive reply from the newspaper of the islands, the *West Highland Free Press*. Naturally, once people are getting money they don't like to lose it. But in these beautiful islands I think that other issues are at stake.

Iceland was like an enormous version of a Hebridean island: once again, farming land all round the margins, and a desolate interior. But much more desolate! Hundreds of miles of plain covered with black lava rock; steaming, sulphurous marshes and gushing geysers; volcanic mountains, covered with snow and in some places with glaciers that never melt. The bird life was startling: not birds that are never seen in Britain, but birds that are rare in Britain and here are common. In London parks, mallards beg for bread, and black-headed gulls coast by; in Reykjavik, it is eider duck that waddle along the edge of the town pond—birds that are confined to lonely coasts in Britain—and arctic terns that flit above the cars. It is this kind of thing that makes a visit to a foreign country rather like a visit to a theatre: you watch intelligible, interesting things being acted out that you are not involved in. And this of course is even truer of the human life you witness. In Iceland, the inflation in recent years has been far worse than in Britain, partly because all the trades unions managed to get index-linked wages for their workers. This is the socialist aspect of Iceland. On the other hand, private enterprise is exceptionally vigorous—it has a Viking dash about it. New housing estates appear on the edge of little towns, where all the houses are built by the people who are going to live in them. So one sees all one's own problems and prospects embodied with a different emphasis and colour.

All this is exhilarating: the only thing you miss if you live abroad for any length of time is the feeling that you are concerned in what's going on around you. You miss not only the rights but the responsibilities. In Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* there is a particularly poignant passage where she observes that for a stateless person, even to be arrested is a relief: one becomes part of the legal system again.

I enjoyed my summer travels; but I wasn't sorry to be back in the the middle of the rows and controversies in my own country.

Still—come and have a holiday again here, away from all yours!

Till then, yours,
DERWENT MAY

The New York Intellectuals
1941-1950:
Some Letters by Weldon Kees



Maurice Johnson, Courtesy of Mrs. Johnson.

EDITED BY ROBERT E. KNOLL

In 1954 Weldon Kees thought of himself as "the most versatile artist now working in America," and his famous friends agreed with him. In the late thirties and early forties, James Laughlin IV of New Directions and Edward J. O'Brien of the Best Short Stories annuals published his fiction. Malcolm Cowley praised his poetry and The New Yorker and Poetry printed it. In the mid-forties Philip Rahv, Edmund Wilson and Dwight Macdonald admired his critical acumen, and the Partisan Review included his essays in its pages. Later in the decade his paintings were exhibited in important New York galleries. His association with Hans Hofmann, Willem de Kooning and Robert Motherwell linked him to the New York School of Abstract Expressionism. When he succeeded Clement Greenberg as art columnist on The Nation in 1949, his judgments earned general respect. After 1950 Nesuhi Ertegun (later an impresario of popular recordings), Turk Murphy and others involved in the San Francisco Jazz Revival gave his music their attention. He now experimented with both still and moving photography, in collaboration with Jurgen Ruesch, the psychiatrist, and Gregory Bateson, the anthropologist-psychologist; and he became involved in stage shows, what later were called "total happenings." Poet, painter, critic, photographer, musician, he seemed to have his hand in everything.

For twenty years Weldon Kees participated actively in the artistic and literary life of the nation. Born in 1914 in Beatrice, Nebraska, at Doane College he wrote and appeared in plays with Arlington Brugh, known to movie goers later as Robert Taylor. When he went to the University of Nebraska (B.A. 1935), he joined a literary circle that included Loren Eiseley and Mari Sandoz. From Denver, where he was a librarian, he went in the summer of 1942 to Yaddo, the artists colony in Saratoga Springs, New York, to spend time with Horace Gregory, Alfred Kazin, Nathan Asch, and other prominent writers. In 1943 he moved to New York City to make his way with his pen. He had visited there earlier, and like half the experimental poets of his generation, he called on Dr. William Carlos Williams in Rutherford, New Jersey. In Manhattan he became a friend of Mary McCarthy, Allen Tate and the Partisan Review crowd. They entertained him in their apartments. Malcolm Cowley was particularly thoughtful; and when Kees needed a job, he helped him get on Time. There Kees observed Walker Evans, Harvey Breit, and Whittaker Chambers. Timenvironment fascinated him. He thought it Kafkaesque.

From Time Kees went to Paramount News, where he wrote and

edited the newsreels that were so important in the war years; and he talked to Manny Farber and James Agee about the movies and all the arts. They planned books together. No leftist himself, he knew many Marxists and former Marxists. Subletting Dwight Macdonald's apartment, he went to gatherings with James T. Farrell and Philip Rahv; and he signed anticommunist manifestos with Sidney Hook. W. H. Auden and Stephen Spender were among his acquaintances, and his observations of their conduct, and rumors of their conduct, amused him. Mary McCarthy told him of a late night conversation with Marianne Moore which made vivid Miss Moore's singular personality. Later on with Elizabeth Bishop he called on Ezra Pound in St. Elizabeth's Hospital.

But for all his associations, Weldon Kees was a man at the edge of the picture, not quite belonging to any group. He put his creative energy into his artistic activities, and in his letters he recorded current gossip and opinion; as a result his letters are often vignettes opening a distant world to our inspection. In his poems—he published volumes in 1943, 1947, and 1955—and in his paintings—he had four one-man shows in New York City—Weldon Kees takes us into a subterranean world of shadows and terrors; but in the letters he focuses on social appearances. This separation of the public man in the correspondence from the private man in the published work is worth pondering; but his complexities are not prominent in the letters here assembled. Here is a group of letters that helps recreate the social milieu of the New York Intellectuals in the forties. They contain portraits of some of the makers and shapers of that decade.

From earliest years, Kees's chief correspondents saved his letters, aware that they had something special in their hands. Though he wrote to everybody—Conrad Aiken, Anton Myrer, Winfield Townley Scott—he remained in touch with two correspondents for twenty years. Norris Getty was an undergraduate friend who shared his satiric temper if not his high literary ambitions. Born in Waco, Nebraska (pop. 350), and educated at the University of Nebraska, after lengthy service in the South Pacific during the Japanese War, he studied Latin and Greek at Harvard and became a classics master at Groton School where the Roosevelts and the Mellons educated their sons. Getty was Weldon's chief editor all his life. To him Kees sent his work for detailed criticism before submitting it to Poetry or Harpers or Knopf. He died, at home in Nebraska, nearly twenty years after his friend, still talking of Weldon Kees.

Weldon Kees's other correspondent was Maurice Johnson, also a

friend from undergraduate years. After graduate study at Columbia University, he became a distinguished professor of English at the University of Pennsylvania. He and Weldon were alike in their habits of observation; and to Johnson, Kees offered sketches of literary occasions that call up those fading years. The letters to Norris Getty and Maurice Johnson included in these pages focus on the forties in New York.

The major collection of Weldon Kees letters and papers is at the Bennett Martin Public Library, Lincoln, Nebraska; but miscellaneous letters are to be found in a number of places around the country. The Weldon Kees-Norris Getty letters are reprinted here with the kind permission of the librarian, The Heritage Room, Bennett Martin Public Library. The Weldon Kees-Maurice Johnson letters are reprinted with the kind permission of Mrs. Maurice Johnson, who has been very helpful in a variety of ways. "The Malcolm Cowley Papers" are in the Newberry Library, Chicago; and I quote from them with the permission of Mr. Cowley and the Newberry Library. The Conrad Aiken letters are in the Huntington Library, and I quote from them with the permission of the library. To all these libraries and persons I extend my sincere thanks for continuing help. I want also to thank Mr. Dana Gioia for his continuing interest in all matters related to Weldon Kees.

—R. E. K.

In this first letter, written from the Denver Public Library, we hear of a visit that Kees and his wife Ann made to the William Carlos Williamses. Norris Getty, having been called to the service, was a lieutenant in Arizona, but he continued to act as Weldon's chief critic. The "Joyce poem" spoken of here was to appear in his volume The Last Man in 1943. Fall Quarter was a satiric, academic novel on which Knopf had taken an option. After considerable discussion, it was finally rejected, and it has remained unpublished.

1060 Pennsylvania
Denver

Dear Norris,

Awfully glad to have your letter, and especially pleased that you liked the Joyce poem. I haven't sent it out anyplace yet; wanted to get your imprimatur on it first. I'll let you know as to its fate.

A gloomy little man from the Railway Express people has just gone out carrying the MS. of FALL QUARTER: I hope it reaches you soon. It would be fine if it would arrive in time for you to cope with it over the weekend. I know you're rushed like everything, but I'll be awfully grateful for any and all reactions and suggestions.

Maybe you'd like to hear about our evening with Dr. Williams. For us it was some kind of a high. Somehow or other I'd managed to pick up all the wrong impressions of what he's actually like. Well, to get to Rutherford, you take a bus east of Bdway on 43d Street, and that late afternoon it was drizzling and gray and we rode downtown and through one of the tunnels to New Jersey and emerged into the drab spaces of Weehawken, Union City, and I don't know what other towns. And between the towns would be vast stretches of New Jersey marshes, wet and empty. The ride takes about forty minutes and we found Rutherford to be not unlike Hastings, Nebraska, slightly less flat, however; and we walked up the hill and were directed the wrong way four times by Rutherfordites. Williams lives in a big white house, very ordinary and comfortable inside except for things you wouldn't be apt to find in the home of a middlewestern physician: prints on the wall by Sheeler and Demuth and E. E. Cummings and books everywhere. Williams is charming, a little shy at first,

decidedly boyish and with a rare kind of sweetness, and his wife is still pretty, though less likable than the doctor. (She was telling us at dinner about how WCW used to ask people out, writers, and they would come and stay for weeks. "One time Bill asked Max Bodenheimer to come here because he was broke and he showed up with his arm in a sling; we found out later nothing was wrong with it, he just wanted to get out of work. The first night we had dinner, I served carrots, and Max looked at them and said, 'Carrots, eh? I don't like carrots, Florence. In the future, while I'm here, you won't serve them.' So after that, I had them for dinner every night." She laughed and Williams said, "Poor Max. God help us.") After dinner we had some drinks and Williams said he had been reading *Henry James at Newport* [a poem published in the current (October 1941) issue of *Poetry*] and would I read it for him? Of course I would. And after I had read it, he took the magazine from me; one particular line—*Remember the detached, the casually disqualified*—had caught his fancy, and he kept reading it over and over aloud, saying, "That's good! That's it! There's a line!" So I got *him* to read some things—"The Yachts" and "The Sea Elephant" and "On the Road to the Contagious Hospital" and some others and he was in fine form, especially on "The Sea Elephant." His voice is really not good, too high and nasal, but he reads marvelously, stressing the flat and anti-poetic qualities. And he seemed pleased by the choices I'd made for him to read. Mrs. Williams said, "I always try to get Bill to read some of the more lyrical ones, but he won't do it." Williams laughed and didn't say anything. Sometime during the evening I mentioned *THE KNIFE OF THE TIMES* and how much I liked it and how I'd tried to buy it and couldn't, and Wms said, "Jesus, I've got a hell of a lot of those babies up in the attic!" So we went up in the attic and everything was a mess. He had a hard time finding the books, but he did, finally, finding along the way some other things he said he'd been trying to find for years, and obviously pleased that he had. There was a fine photograph of an old lady sitting on a porch, which hung on the wall, and he said, "That's Emily Dickinson; you know, my English grandmother." . . . Walking down to our bus with us late that evening, we saw the bus coming and the three of us ran for it (me clutching

the book he had given me with something he'd written in it for me) and he said, "You read better than I do! Gee, it's swell you came over." It was raining again and we had to hurry; the bus was waiting. "So long. Goodbye. Write!"

And sometime I want to talk with you and fill in the gaps.

Yours,
Weldon

28 October 1941

Abrupt ending caused by the return of Mrs. Billings from lunch, wanting to use the machine. I wanted to write about Cheever and some other people; I guess it'll have to wait until next time—have to get to work.

When in February 1943, Kees moved to New York City, Ann went home to Wyoming. Her emotional state was unsteady, as letters to Norris Getty clearly show; and Weldon did not feel that he could deal with her distraught condition. In New York he used the office of his agent (Russell and Volkening) as a mailing address until he could get located. Because of his earlier visits and his reputation as a rising young poet, he already knew a number of literary people, but he sought out others. In 1943, in addition to poetry and fiction, he was editing a volume of satiric verse about which he talked to Edmund Wilson. He wrote to Maurice Johnson, in the service and stationed in Wyoming, of an evening with Wilson and his then wife, Mary McCarthy.

[March 1943]

% Russell and Volkening
522 Fifth Avenue
New York City

Dear Maurice,

The evening I spent with Mary and Edmund Wilson was one of the pleasantest I've had in a long time. And I was a little alarmed, too, what with Newton Arvin's letter, what with the story Alfred Kazin had told me about the evening *he'd* had with them, and what with all the other stories I'd heard about both of them.—It was snowing as I got off the bus at Union Square and walked east on 15th street. When I rang

the bell, "the electric clicking began—with its quick and ready profusion, plucking distinctly the string of excitement which was still capable of vibrating in my breast at the prospect of meeting new people in Greenwich Village."*—I had gone inside and had begun to climb the rather rickety stairway when the front door opened and I heard my name called. It was Wilson, easily recognizable in the glum light of the hallway, his hat and overcoat snow-covered; he looked up at me and said, "What are you doing in town, Weldon? Awfully glad you're here, awfully glad you could come." And I passed some pleasantries, and we shook hands and went up the stairs together.—Mary came to the door, very dark, very young-looking, wearing a green wool dress, and said (to Wilson) "Hello, darling," and he said, "Hello dear;" and we were introduced and very soon were drinking old-fashioneds and I was being introduced to Edmund's eighteen-year old daughter (by what wife, I don't know) whose name is Rosamond and who resembles her father very much. And then Edmund said he thought he'd better shave, and took his drink in the bathroom with him and talked occasionally through the door while Mary and I talked about Graham Greene and Eric Ambler and Raymond Chandler.

It was a very fine evening, and the meal was good; and I found Wilson completely and marvelously articulate—no pauses or lapses or stutterings at all—and to me, at least, he exhibited no evidence of that "touchiness," about which I had heard so much. We talked a great deal about satirical poetry—he kept asking me, "Are you using this?" (naming some poem) and I was using them all, which may have piqued him a little; then finally he thought of a poem of Arthur Waley's that I had forgotten, and, I think, felt better.—Their little four-year old son had to go to the bathroom, and after he had attended to his small need, he came happily out of the john completely naked and romped around the room with elation. Mary finally succeeded in getting him into his pajamas, remarking, as she did so, that she had inadvertently bought girl's pajamas for him instead of boy's. When he wanted to know what the difference was, she gave a very neat explana-

* *I Thought of Daisy*, by E. Wilson, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1929 [footnote by W.K.]

tion.—And now Edmund has gone to Red Bank, where his mother is very ill; and a couple of nights ago I was at the Rahvs for dinner, and later Lionel Abel came over, and a little later, Mary. Afterwards, as Mary and I left together, we discovered we were starving, and went down to the diner on 8th st. and ate hamburgers and played the juke-box (while we were there, one of the coffee boilers blew up) and she told me about how she had lost God (a Catholic one) when she was twelve years old. And about a story she wants to write called “4F.”

No more paper. Write.

Ever,
Weldon

Weldon got hired by Time. He was clearly as delighted with the people on the staff as he was with his work.

Time & Life Building
Rockefeller Center
New York

Editorial Offices

18 May 1943

Dear Maurice

Lean, gangling Weldon Kees is now working for Time, Inc., is a book-reviewer, works with other Time book-reviewers Nigel Dennis, Harvey Breit, Whittaker Chambers.

To drop the manner, which is with me a good deal these days, I might say that I find all of this pretty fantastic, but by no means unpleasant. T. S. Matthews turned me over to Wilder Hobson, who is editing the so-called “cultural departments” on the magazine. They liked the first review I did for them, and now I am on the payroll at an amazing salary—more money than I ever expected to make. And the arrangement is good in lots of other ways: for the time being I work at home and only go up to the 29th floor of the Time and Life Building twice a week—once to attend a conference, and the other time to turn in my copy. This happy set-up may not continue for long, since I may be shifted to another depart-

ment. I don't find Books a bad place to be at all, though.

One thing I have learned: you can tell nothing of what people are actually on the magazine from looking at the masthead. Walker Evans, for instance is doing movies; James Stern, art. One bumps into such people as Howard Moss and Reuel Denney. The place itself reminds me a little of a college dormitory: people are always wandering around the halls, dropping into one's office to talk.

*

Saw the Wilsons the other night before they left for the Cape. Edmund is going to do a book on Poe next. *THE SHOCK OF RECOGNITION* has been postponed, but will be out early in June. I may do it for *Time*.

I've got a piece to finish that is troubling me and must get back to it; but I wanted you to know how things whirl here. I enjoyed yr account of the Lazy U enormously; do let me have the latest on it, and you.

Yours ever,
Weldon

Russell & Volkening address still safest.

Did you ever read Kenneth Burke's *THE WHITE OXEN*? As I recall, the U. of Wyoming Library has it. There are two or three very good stories in it.

*The job on Time did not last, though Weldon Kees wrote a number of pieces which bear rereading to this day. In midsummer Ann came to New York. Weldon did not have the heart to refuse her, and they became famous as a duo, rarely appearing singly at parties or public gatherings. Though Weldon's first volume of verse, *The Last Man* (1943), was dedicated to Norris Getty and Maurice Johnson, his second, *The Fall of the Magicians* (1947), was "For Ann." Joe Gould, who is mentioned in the last line of this letter, was a Greenwich Village eccentric whose birthday party was covered by PM, the daily journal of opinion. Ann and Weldon Kees were in several of its news pictures, and Weldon thought his friend in Wyoming would be amused at seeing the literati, and subliterati, at play. In September 1943 Weldon had been classified 4F as psychologically unfit for military service. He was much relieved, for he hated military restraints.*

129 East 10th Street
 New York City
 9 October 1943

Dear Norris,

"A letter," says Laura Riding, "must be composed in leisure. Its wrongness must have the authoritative formality of a premeditated crime. A letter written under stress and because its astonished author could not help writing it is an act of insanity. The mails are full of helpless insanity . . ."

Rather than perpetrate an outright act of madness, I have waited until now to begin this letter, though I can hardly pretend that these recent days have not been without stress. Both Ann & I have been looking for jobs, at the same time searching for an apartment; and a few days ago my folks arrived for a week's visit. When I have nothing better to do, I write reviews.

Did I write you that TIME and I came to the parting of the ways? It is difficult to figure out why big organizations do anything that they do; Jim Agee believes that the people at the top are as bewildered as the people at the bottom. And perhaps a good Kafkaesque story might be written in which this very point could be explored. What if K. got to the Castle and found the hierarchy just as baffled as he had been?—Somehow, though, I don't like to dwell on Mr. Luce in these terms. Even though Elsa Maxwell's column portrays him as a man with a "deep moral sense."—I used to race around from one projection room to another, from one on West 55th (very comfortable leather chairs) to another in the RCA Building, and on to the RKO Building—oh, hell, they *all* have lovely chairs; if only the pictures were up to the chairs—and one day I saw three features and two of them had both Noah Beery, Jr. and Diana Barrymore. Seeing pictures all day left no time for writing in the Time & Life Building; so I wrote my reviews at home at night. We were ostensibly working a five-day week; it seemed to me I was always working seven, and always going to screenings on what were hopefully referred to as "weekends." And my movie reviews did not please Mr. Whittaker Chambers, my editor. He had liked the book reviews. "Our readers," said he, "don't want to hear you

groan.”—As yet, TIME has not found a cinema critic that thoroughly pleases. It is believed there that books, art, and a few other things may be written for a “limited” body of readers. In the case of moving pictures, though—well, *everybody* goes to movies. Consequently, a more popular approach. So the entire staff of the magazine is ransacked in order to locate this richly-desired individual with the man-on-the-street approach. I believe in one year there were seven switches on this job.—When I was to be inducted into the armed forces, I was given \$400 severance pay, and I can’t say it made me unhappy.—Or perhaps I was just part of the purge. They have fired about eight or ten writers this month, and some weird doings go on there. I heard yesterday that Luce, who ordinarily sits in his office on the 31st floor, dreaming perhaps of China and Episcopalianism, has come down to edit the magazine himself; Matthews has apparently been demoted. The arteries are hardening; there is much worry about the deterioration of the magazine.—Oh yes, another thing. So long as nothing is said to one about the quality of one’s work, one is safe. At the sound of the question (from one of the Senior Editors): “Are you happy here?” you know that your goose is cooked. A friend of mine, who worked on TIME several years ago, was called into Gottfried’s office one day. Said Gottfried: “I’m sorry, Sidney, but we have reluctantly come to the conclusion that you don’t have that intangible something that makes a TIME writer.” Said Sidney: “Well, we can’t discuss intangibles, can we?”

Then there’s the story of the man on FORTUNE who was sent out to do a long piece on the Union Pacific R.R. He went west, rode on cabooses, tramped the rails, sold tickets, sat in the President’s office, examined hotboxes, fired the engine, talked to railroad workers all down the line. For two months he saw everything there was to see concerning the U.P. At the end of this investigation he returned to his office on the 30th floor of the T & L Building. He had some hundred books on railroads, stacks of handouts from the U.P., piles of notes he had made himself. All these he carefully arranged on his desk. They almost covered its surface.—And every day he came down to work; other members of the staff, walking past his office, would glance in and see him sitting at his desk, slumped down in his chair, his arms folded, *staring* bewil-

dered at this mass of stuff. Every day they went by, looked in; they never saw him move. They never saw him writing. It went on like that for weeks. Every day he came in, sat at his desk and stared for six or seven hours, and, at the end of the day, put on his hat and coat and went home. One morning, at the end of the third week, he suddenly jumped up from his chair, shrieking fiendishly, picked up everything on his desk and threw it out of the window. They took him off to Bellevue.

*

What you wrote about *THE LAST MAN* could only give me great pleasure. And there's no one I'd rather please. There are naturally some things in the book that I no longer like. That you approve of *FUGUE* and *WHEN THE LEASE IS UP* is something I was particularly glad to know about, because I felt a little queasy about those two. Sometime, if you care to, you might let me know of any particular words, lines and effects that displease you, with suggestions for revision. I think a writer gets blind to certain things after a poem is frozen in type: he may admire his worst faults and underrate some merits. This may sound foolish, but what I have always tried to do is to write the kind of poetry I like to read: an impossible task one sometimes, through luck, manages to do. Or thinks one does.—I must say I feel too little sense of “belonging” with my immediate contemporaries, with the exception of four or five guys. It's so easy, don't you think, to feel a sense of identification with the men of the Pound-Eliot generation, or even the Hart Crane-Tate-Horace Gregory generation, rather than the present gang, with its Rukeysters and Shapiros and John Frederick Nimses.

Your letter about the book came on a day when I needed it badly. I had just gone over to see the editors of *COMMON SENSE* about an article on Randolph Bourne I'm writing for them, and Dick Rovere showed me Babette Deutch's review of *THE LAST MAN*, which will come out in the magazine's next issue. It was in an omnibus review that included the new O. Williams anthology, a Tom Boggs anthology, and few other books. After much praise of Boggs poetry and the work of one Lenore G. Marshall, she turned in a displeased report on *THE LAST MAN*. It appears that while there “is no denying my competence,” what impressed her was the fact that I had

read a great many books and was much-traveled. No individual or original response, etc. The poems also depressed her.

Wish you could get back here on a leave. We'd love to see you. Tomorrow we're moving to a very nice apartment indeed (129 East 10th Street); write us there from now on.

Ann sends her best; congratulations on your promotion; let us hear from you often; let me know if there's anything in the way of books, magazines or anything else I might pick up for you here. I asked the New Republic to send you a copy of this week's NR that carries a review of mine, and here is the Joe Gould spread.

Yours ever, Norris,
Weldon

Very shortly Ann got a job on Antiques, and Weldon began writing Paramount newsreels. He describes for Maurice Johnson how these reports were made, upon Johnson's request.

129 East Tenth Street
New York City 3
16 December 1943

Dear Maurice,

That was an awfully good letter of yours about letters, and we were grateful to have the letter and clipping regarding the activities of the large cat in Roselle that gave Mr. Leach so much trouble. Now:

EDMUND WILSON AND OTHERS:

Edmund was in one of his grumpier moods. Ann had never met the author of *Axel's Castle* and other works before and was a little shocked at his lack of amiability. This was a few evenings ago at the Rahvs'. There were two people there whose names I didn't at first catch (one of them turned out to be Philip Blair Rice, managing editor of the Kenyon Review) and I spent the first half-hour deliriously trying to figure out, from things that were said, who they were. Wilson evidently had the same trouble: he kept calling Rice "Mr. Wheelwright"; finally he said, "You *are* Philip Wheelwright, aren't you?" This may have had something to do with Rice's sotto voce remark to me: "I think everyone in New York is crazy."

This was said, as I recall, at some point between Mary McCarthy's explanation of who the real heroine of *The Golden Bowl* is (I never found out: Natalie Rahv was telling me, rather irritably, what all was wrong with Dwight Macdonald) and an argument about the proper way to pronounce Randall Jarrell's last name. (Accent on the last syllable, says Edmund Wilson, adding that Jarrell is "essentially an adolescent and only interesting in his poetry when he is working off his infantile obsessions." In connection with this, you once mentioned the bevy of bears that turn up in Jarrell's work. I think now that these are all, to the last one, teddy bears.)—The Wilsons have just moved back into town from the Cape and Edmund begins as Fadiman's successor either this week or next. He said he was going to write more about little-known books. But he didn't want to talk about his job much and kept asking me to tell him about my experiences on TIME. "What about Cantwell?" he kept insisting; later on he revealed that he has been working on a piece showing how Luce ruins promising writers—a thesis one should have little trouble in proving.—The Wilsons went home (Gramercy Park) before we did; we left with Rice and the man whose name I hadn't caught. I suggested we go someplace in the Village and have a sandwich; Rice had to go home; so the nameless man (who had bothered me all evening because he so closely resembled that bundle of horrors, Robert Paul Smith) accompanied us. Somehow I had picked up the information that he lived in Philadelphia and taught there, and I asked him what he taught. "I used to be head of the Romance Languages Department at Haverford until this Spring; my wife was going to have a baby in five months and one day she shot herself," he said. Now he spends every Tuesday evening with Wystan Hugh Auden, who is in a bad way himself. Isherwood is in Hollywood translating the *Gita*; but what he *really* wants to do is to write a novel about Hollywood. "Christopher," said our new friend, "was fascinated by *The Last Tycoon*."

NOTES ON THE MAKING OF NEWSREELS:

Most of the time we sit in one of the two little showrooms and look at film that comes in. The make-up staff and several cutters, usually. There is the stuff that our own cameramen make, film from rotapool, newsreels from England and Rus-

sia and Australia and Canada and South America, captured film from the Germans and the Japanese. On Mondays and Thursdays most of the actual work is done. With the cutters we decide what scenes we are going to use; film is cut; other film is pulled out of library material sometimes for other scenes that are thought worth including; by one o'clock in the afternoon, ordinarily, one newsreel story has been completely edited and cut. A title is written and printed, the announcer is called to report at a certain time, the sound men go to work fitting music to the film and putting in effects, the writer sits in front of a little meter that ticks off footage and, with a copy of the scene list (which looks like this one below), writes what the announcer will say.

- | | |
|--|--------|
| 1. TITLE IN THE CLEAR: GLUE FOR VICTORY: | 5 ft. |
| 2. General view of old horses | 6 ft. |
| 3. Close up of bottle of glue | 11 ft. |
| 4. Hand pours bottle of glue on enemy alien | 16 ft. |
| etc., for anywhere from 60 feet to 700 feet. | |

By that time the chief editor has set a time for the synchronization, and this is usually about an hour or two after the scene list has been typed up by the cutters. At that time the writer takes his lines up to the studio; the announcer is there, a projectionist, and the sound crew. The writer and announcer go over the lines as the film is run, and the sound men rehearse the music and effects. When all are satisfied that everything jells, a preliminary take is made, a bell rings, and most of the staff come up to hear the playback. Revisions are made in the lines and music and effects and the announcer is instructed to put more feeling into a certain passage, or his pronunciation of some word is questioned. After everyone is satisfied (the most difficult matter is the one of timing) two master takes are made and these are sent down to the laboratory to be printed. The announcer, I ought to add, never looks at the screen while he's enthusiastically describing what goes on: he keeps his eyes on the lines that have been written for him and speaks only when cued by the writer (some announcers like to be cued by a sweeping motion of the fingers and some by being tapped on the shoulder.) Everything clear now?

On Tuesdays I get out the reels in Portuguese and Spanish. Mr. Pardo, the Spanish announcer, and Mr. Feldman, the Portuguese announcer who doesn't use that name on his title credits, make Tuesdays fascinating if often exhausting. It is wonderful how many devices can be employed in cueing languages one barely understands.

REQUEST:

If you can send more letters from soldiers, I wish you would. Jim Agee and I are thinking of editing a book of letters, all kinds of letters. I think such a book, if carefully edited and cut with an eye to surprise, would make most current fiction look even duller than its worst detractors say it is. All letters would be ones never before published—letters one and one's friends have received, letters found on the street and in library books, a vast catchall for some of the marvelous things that should be printed. I'd be grateful for anything at all you'd send. Do you still have that fantastic letter of recommendation from [Professor Orin] Stepanek [of the University of Nebraska]? We'd have to change names in many cases, of course. And would you object to having some of your own letters included?—When our plans are more definite, I'll let you know. We don't plan to put in much work on this project unless we can get an advance from a publisher that will pay a good typist's wages for a couple of months. And though Jim and I agree, I think, pretty much on the sort of thing to include, I wonder how this projected collaboration will work out.

COMING!

NOTES ON FILM CRITICS, or, MANNY FARBER AND JAMES AGEE, TOGETHER AND APART.

Write. Ann sends her best.

Yours,
Weldon

Kees's interest in writing fiction did not revive in New York even though his agent continued to peddle Fall Quarter. Hoping to place it, Weldon constructed a synopsis for a new novel, but it did not grow, perhaps because he got no encouragement from publishers. This plot contains cinematic sequences. Later, in California, Kees tried his hand at producing, directing, and scoring his own films.

SYNOPSIS OF AN UNTITLED NOVEL BY WELDON KEES

Carl Ellis, a young scholar at somewhat loose ends, comes upon a volume of poems by a writer named Fredric Shore Strandquist. Fascinated by his work, which is little known, Ellis attempts to find out something about Strandquist, with a view to writing about him, but meets with small success. All he is able to dig up are a few reviews of his book. The publisher who brought out the volume is dead, and his small press no longer in existence. After following several roads that turn out to be blind alleys, Ellis discovers that Strandquist's family lives on Long Island, and goes out to see them.

They are people of wealth who are little inclined to give Ellis much information about Fredric, a black sheep; but what Ellis learns—that they have not seen Fredric for some fifteen years and that they are not sure (or willing to tell) whether he is dead or alive—greatly excites his curiosity. The outcome of this meeting is a private conversation with Fredric's uncle, who tells Ellis that he himself is most interested in learning what happened to Fredric, and feels Ellis out on the possibility of Ellis undertaking an investigation. The few facts Ellis has learned are of such interest—the uncle shows him several letters and photographs of Fredric and hints darkly about various misdeeds of his—that when the uncle offers to pay him a good salary and his expenses to conduct this search, he accepts at once.

The story from then on will deal with the progress of Ellis's search (which takes him to Chicago, San Francisco, Hollywood, Denver, and several small places in the middlewest and, finally, back to New York again), in the course of which he comes in contact with many people Strandquist has known, including two of his wives and several mistresses. He learns that Strandquist twice changed his name, is a bigamist, may be a murderer, and worked at a variety of occupations, at some times making fantastically large salaries and at other times living in great poverty. The more material Ellis assembles, the more confused he becomes as to what sort of a man Strandquist was: he seems to have been capable of many changes of character and personality. Ellis's quest is further complicated by the fact that he suspects various persons who knew Strandquist of lying to protect themselves.

Ellis's discovery that Strandquist is still alive, and his meeting with him forms the climax of the book, with Strandquist's personality at last fully clarified for the reader, if not for the man who has searched for him—for Ellis has seen and heard too much and knows that the task of fully discovering and understanding another human being—at least this one—is an impossibility. A moving picture version would of necessity, I should think, concentrate on the shock effect of Strandquist's appearance and the contrast between his expected personality and "real" one. The whole work, I hope, will have the same kind of chase excitement supplied by Greene and Hitchcock.

Weldon Kees

21 February 1944

Kees reports on the wartime social life of the New York literati to Johnson, in the service in Wyoming.

129 East Tenth Street

New York City 3

1 April 1944

Dear Maurice,

Outside, in the courtyard, a man in a gray hat and gray topcoat has been standing for a long time now making little marks on a piece of paper. Ann says it is a map. Maybe so. He keeps looking in windows. A survey, no doubt. The Lenten bells of the neighborhood have been ringing like mad ever since we got up.

We got up with slight hangovers. Yesterday, after work, we went to a cocktail party at Dwight Macdonald's. There was quite a mob and lots of noise; when Harold Rosenberg arrived, he said it sounded like an auction sale. "What," asked Harold, "am I offered for this worthless political idea?"—I suppose you have read about Jim Farrell's latest turmoil. The cops have been investigating STUDS LONIGAN: They had the impression that it was concerned with the Wayne Loneragan case. And, even when it had been pointed out to them, by Henle of Vanguard, that this could not possibly be so, since it was published in 1935, they were still not unsuspicious. Mary McCarthy told me at the party that Jim had writ-

ten to Edmund, asking him for a statement. Edmund didn't think any statement was necessary, since there had been no ban, only a little snooping around, and didn't write anything. He could have written: "Studs Lonigan and Wayne Lonergan are not the same," I suppose. But he wrote nothing, and now Jim is sore at him.—What, by the way, do you think of Wilson's pieces in *The New Yorker*? This is certainly criticism, especially after Mr. Fadiman; but they seem fearfully uneven in merit. The piece on Evelyn Waugh, for example, with its astonishing admission that he had never read anything of Waugh's until a year ago.

After Dwight's party, we had dinner at a Mexican place and saw a French movie with Raimu, *HEART OF PARIS*: none too good; and wound up at George's, a night club in the Village, which, before the war, was almost exclusively patronized by painters. We ran into Herb Bernstein there, the brother of William Poster, the chap who reviewed *THE LAST MAN* for the NR [*New Republic*]. Herb and Willie lead mysterious lives: even their closest friends have never seen the place where they live, their address being carefully guarded. They can only be reached by calling Herb's mistress, a girl named Evelyn who takes pictures in uptown nightclubs. Willie once worked in the post office and Herb taught Philosophy at Columbia, but now neither of them seem to work or to have worked at anything for years. Where their money comes from is something no one knows. It is rumored that they own a couple of apartment houses. Neither of them like to get above 14th Street and they rarely see daylight, I gather.—Herb was in a strange mood and revealed that he plans to take trumpet lessons from Frankie Newton. Frankie is supposed to be playing at George's (although he wasn't there last night) but his interest in music, so Herb informed us, is on the wane: he's now taking drawing lessons from someone on 57th Street and is distressed when one attempts to talk to him about anything else but Art. Herb said that life had been looking up for his (Herb's) set of late because recently they had managed to get their hands on a really splendid new shipment of 'tea': he reeked of it. People kept socking it in on the dancefloor. The guitar player looked something like Hot Lips Page. Herb said, "My wife's up at the bar; I'll get her."

We had never met her, though we had heard of Dorothy, who is still in love with him and won't give him a divorce. We liked her better than Evelyn, and it was a bad moment when I asked her where she lived and Herb said, "Thirteenth Street," and she corrected, "Twelfth." A friend of theirs came up who has some money in a new musical called ALLAH BE PRAISED; he said it was flopping in its tryout in Philadelphia and they had removed Ned Sparks from the cast because he was no good. For a man whose show was doing so poorly he seemed remarkably well pleased with things.

We had gone to listen to the music, but the music wasn't any good.

What do you think the post-war world will be like?

It was Herb who threw Alfred Kazin out of the Bernstein home years ago. It was Herb and Willie who introduced Alfred to literature years before that, when, I gather, Alfred was fourteen or fifteen and then bent on a career as a concert violinist. (Alfred still extracts neurosis-inviting sounds from a fiddle; there are no aural effects quite like those produced by a combination composed of Alfred, violin, and Saul Bellow & Isaac Rosenfeld, recorders. Have you ever heard a New Republic editor play a recorder?)—And now Alfred's paranoia has come in to its full flower. No one knows where he is. He lined up three jobs a few weeks ago—a teaching job at Black Mountain, another at Swarthmore, and another which he created for himself by talking the Rockefeller Foundation into sending him to England to investigate the Army's educational program abroad. Now he's going to England—if he can get a passport. His wound, his rectal wound, has healed. He has quit his job at *Fortune*. No one knows where he is. Even Isaac Rosenfeld, his closest friend, doesn't know where he is; but he thinks he is hiding out in a hotel in town somewhere. Meanwhile, he has not yet returned *I Thought of Daisy*, which he borrowed eight months ago.

Yes, I put together a new collection of poems. It's called THE FALL OF THE MAGICIANS, and is just the size for Laughlin's POET OF THE MONTH series (soon to be changed, one hears, to POET OF THE BI-MONTH). So I sent it to Jay and he's had it for a long while, and I can't get any word from him.

Getty is somewhere in the South Pacific. Yr. friend Earl Avitt [Evitt] is at the Grosvenor, on lower 5th Avenue. . . . Ann sends her best.

Yours ever,
Weldon

Editing the Paramount newsreel dealing with Iwo Jima sent Weldon home sick, knocked flat, as he said. His friend, James Agee, commenting on it in The Nation, March 24, 1945, said ". . . in this Paramount issue it seems to me that rhetoric was used well, to construct as well as might be in ten hours' work and in ten minutes on the screen an image of one of the most terrible battles in history."

[20 March 1945]
129 East 10th Street
New York City 3

Dear Maurice,

Diary of a bronchitic schizoid...

March 19th. The cough syrup is delicious; not so much can be said for the nose drops. A card from the Gramercy Book Shop saying that THE GATHERING STORM by Wm. Empson has arrived. I haven't been to work for almost a week. It was the full reel on Iwo Jima that laid me out. Worked from nine in the morning until six the next morning. Knocked me flat for two days.

March 17th. Reading a book of poems in manuscript by Lindley Williams Hubbell: ROUGH CROSSING. It is astonishing how much alike he and Rexroth are, though I am told by a friend of Hubbell that he had never read Rexroth until recently. This manuscript has been rejected by twenty publishers, yet it is worth the collected *oeuvres*, entire, of M. Ruckeyser, John Malcolm Brinnin, John Frederick Nims and Marguerite Young. Slept a great deal, though little girl who lives in the Public Valet Service building screamed with unusual zest all day. Heavy walking around upstairs.

March 16th. Two notes in the mail:

(A) On a postal card from the *Contemporary Jewish Record*: "Would you like to review A. M. Klein's POEMS for us? Not more than three or four hundred words would be needed, and there would be at least \$25 in it for you. And you don't have to say anything you don't honestly think. . . .As ever, Clem." [Clement Greenberg]

(b) On the snazzy stationery of *Harper's Bazaar*:

"Mrs. Aswell is out of the office for a few weeks, but we would like to buy your VILLANELLE. Will thirty dollars be acceptable to you? Sincerely yours, Dorothy Wheelock, Associate Editor."

Coughing, blocked nasal passages, ennui.

March 10th. Dinner with Alvin Lustig, who we met through Jas. Laughlin. He has one of those brow-wrinkling jobs at LOOK Magazine, heading part of their post-war-planning program. His office, which he designed himself, is the last word in moderne, and very nice indeed. Learned that McKnight Kauffer and Paul Rand, both of whom he knows, are terrifically neurotic; he showed us some of their recent work which he (Lustig) is using in a mammoth book on modern design he's editing. And Lustig is also going to edit a new magazine which will combine some of the features of THE NEW YORKER, FORTUNE, PARTISAN REVIEW and the old VANITY FAIR and will look like De Stijl or the Bauhaus. I am supposed to do a piece for it. Tried to sell him on the idea of getting Sherry Mangan to do an article on the decay of the avant-garde, a subject Lustig brought up....After dinner, home reading the proof sheets of Patchen's MEMOIRS OF A SHY PORNOGRAPHER, which Laughlin had sent me. This is one of the worst novels ever written.

March 7. Picasso show at Buchholz.

March 5. While I was auditioning Everett Sloane (whom I did not expect to have flaming red hair), I told him how much I

had enjoyed his performance in *CITIZEN KANE*, and went on to say that both that film and *THE MAGNIFICENT AMBERSONS* were two of the very few films that had a Joycean quality—the “epiphany” idea. Sloane said: “Orson always conceives scenes either as directorial or acting tours de force. That scene where Aggie keels over by the boiler was just drummed up by Orson as a tour de force for her. . . .” While I was auditioning Myron McCormick, he didn’t say much of anything.

March 3. Party at Don Ling’s, Jim Agee’s brother-in-law’s. Jam session featuring Wilder Hobson on trombone. We scored our greatest triumph on our renditions of *The Sheik of Araby*, *Sweet Lorraine*, and *Tea for Two*.

March 2. Went up to Jim Farrell’s. He has now been on the wagon for a year. Said he hadn’t been working much—only a new book of criticism, and three books almost finished: a novel, a book on Tolstoy, and a book on Stendhal . . . When I came home, Ann and Dr. Born were still at work on his manuscript. He talked for some time about Thomas Mann, who has been his close friend since they were young men.

March 1. Finished the painting I’ve been working on for over two months. An evil-looking head. Colors: green, earth, black, vermillion, white, chrome yellow, a darker green, sky blue.

Feb. 28. All the poets I know that don’t write poetry any more: Louise Bogan, Harvey Breit, Harold Rosenberg, Jim Agee, Ben Belitt, Malcolm Cowley, Lionel Abel, Leonie Adams . . .

Feb. 24. Thirty-one years old today. Finished my second book of poems. Farbers here for dinner.

Yours ever,
Weldon

Have you ever read Ford Madox Ford’s *The Good Soldier*? I am amazed. About the best novel by an Englishman in several generations. Honestly.

When at last the war was over, Ann and Weldon Kees, no less than Norris Getty and Maurice Johnson, hoped for a return to stability; and in the fall of 1945 they moved to a new apartment discovered for them by Howard Nemerov. In 1946 Weldon had little trouble getting his second volume of verse accepted for publication, for there seemed to be a bullish market just then for poetry, brought on in part by the commercial success of Karl Shapiro's volumes of war poems.

227 East 25th Street
New York City 10
12 May 1946

Dear Maurice,

I suppose the oddest bit of news I can bring you is the story about Auden's sex life. According to a source I have always found reliable, W.H. has been sleeping with the wife of a little-known book reviewer named Klonsky or Skoski or something of the sort. Before consummating their passion, a conversation between the couple had reference to Auden's heterosexual purity; he told the girl never to mention this matter to anyone, i.e., that he had slept with her, because "no one would believe it anyway." But everyone does. Everyone, that is, except Allen Tate.

Tate won't believe, either, that Randall Jarrell has been excommunicated by the Partisan Review boys. He says it's just because Jarrell doesn't like to see anyone and stays in his loft on Hudson Street—where he lives with a man who writes textbooks on radio engineering—writing poems and reading Groddeck. Evidently that bear in the cave metaphor of Jarrell's comes right from the heart.

Tate is now working as an editor for Holt, which has brought about a strange situation for me. For six months I've been sending my new book of poems around. I probably went about it wrong, sending it to all sorts of unlikely places. Suddenly two houses wanted it—Reynal & Hitchcock and Holt. Reynal is going to do it, but don't hold your breath: it will probably come out this winter. Meantime the feud between the firms continues. Both of them want to publish poetry on a wider scale. Tate is sore that R&H are publishing Denis Devlin, Reed Whittemore and me; and R&H are sore that Tate got Howard Nemerov. Watch the best seller lists.

Your colleagues sound agreeable. I've seen some of Balcomb Greene's paintings and have liked them. Can't remember of his ever having a show of his own, but perhaps that was before I lived in New York. Five or six years ago he had a very odd piece of expressionist prose in the *Partisan Review*. I'd like to know more about him.

The last two weeks I haven't been working and have painted almost every day. I am doing a series of good-sized gouaches that have their points. I'll get back to writing again sometime, but just now paint is too exciting. [. . .]

What did you think of Edmund Wilson's book-length aphrodisiac [*Memoirs of Hecate County*]? I liked it, most of it, a good deal; but most people here don't. They don't say why very clearly.

Yours ever,
Weldon

117 East 10th Street
New York City 3
23 July 1946

Dear Norris,

I take as my text my last letter—the one you sent back by mistake, thereby unveiling, I dare say, some deep Freudian urge. But your aberration makes possible a little continuity from February to July.

Since then, the scene in poetry publishing has taken on more glowing hues. This is due somewhat to Tate. He got fed up with the town of Sewanee and also needed to make some more money; so he took a job with Henry Holt when they agreed to let him wave a free hand in the stratosphere of belles lettres. This move coincided with a move on the part of Reynal & Hitchcock, where Albert Erskine was pointing out to his colleagues that Stinky Shapiro had taken them out of a red ink as far as verse is concerned. Suddenly there were two houses "vitaly" "interested" in "poetry." (As I write this, I have a sinking feeling that this all means next to nothing.) What has actually occurred is this: Tate wanted my new book of poems for Holt, and so did Reynal & Hitchcock. Tate didn't appear on the scene quite soon enough; so R&H got it and it should be coming out sometime this winter. Erskine

does such a good job of designing that I'm pleased they're doing it. Hell, I'm terribly happy it's coming out at all. . . . And Tate took Howard Nemerov's book for Holt.

The references to Tate give me an opportunity for a smooth transition to the news of his friend, Thomas Stearns Eliot. I suppose you've read that Eliot is over here in this country. Just what he's doing here I don't know. He came down here to see Dwight Macdonald—we're living in Dwight's apartment for the summer while he's on the Cape—but all D. had to say about Eliot was that he was a devotee of POLITICS [Macdonald's periodical] and that he looked very old and worn down. Apparently Dwight spent the entire evening delivering a lecture. . . . Tate spent a good deal of time with Eliot and took him down one evening to see Djuna Barnes (a meeting to tear old men away from their chimney corners, I should think), but I haven't seen Tate since. Eliot's journey has had very little mention in the press. I expected, at the very least, an interview in one of the Episcopalian organs.

Now we track back a bit to a reference in the preceding paragraph, just like in a Conrad novel. We're subletting Dwight's apartment to get away from our little 25th street noisebox: in the summertime it combines some of the poorer features of Grand Central Station, Ebbetts Field, Bellevue and the Chautauqua Bell Ringers. Here we have wonderful quiet, a Steinway grand, tropical fish, a fine library (a bit top-heavy on Marxism) and five times the room. All this will end in September and we hope we'll be able to find something else instead of returning to 25th Street.

I wish I could tell you about my painting, but I don't think I'd have any luck, even if I tried. It is all abstract and probably too derivative of Picasso, so far. You'll see what I've done when you get back here, which I hope will be soon. What have you heard from the Harvard Graduate School?

I've seen something of Randall Jarrell lately. He is rather oddly childish at times: once, in a restaurant, he became abnormally tickled over one item on the menu, "Turkey Wing Au Jus." The thing that rather puts one off about him is his way of hoarding his wit for his writing. But I feel very warm towards him: he took a couple of my poems for THE NATION, and I just finished a review of Hoffman & Allen's THE LITTLE MAGAZINE for that publication. Have you

seen the book? I thought it was cretinous. The subject needed "inside" treatment, which those boys couldn't supply. It does have, though, some of the most wonderful unconscious humor I've run into, outside of small-town journalism. You're mentioned, by the way. Look yourself up in the index.

I'm still with Paramount News. Have had several raises and I still find it as good a way of making a living as any I know of. It continues strenuous. The week we got out a full reel on the Bikini tests, I was here until 7:30 in the morning; the next makeup day I was here until 5:00. But there are many weeks that are very easy. . . . Ann is now assistant editor of *ANTIQUES* and got a very good raise a while back. She works too hard, too. After my experiences on *TIME*, I don't have much desire ever to work again on a magazine. Maybe a quarterly, but I doubt it.

Do you ever get into a situation where you look at a copy of *GOOD HOUSEKEEPING*? This sounds silly. The reason I ask is that William March tells me, everytime he sees me, that he is selling stories to them right & left, he contends they are the same kind of stories he's always written. They have bought ten or so, and he now gets \$1500 apiece for them. I've been meaning to procure some back copies and check up on some of Bill's claims, which sound rather strange. He told us his last *GOOD HOUSEKEEPING* story dealt with breast-fetishists. That doesn't sound like the *GOOD HOUSEKEEPING* I used to know.

Let me know if this reaches you. Again I am covered with shame when I think of how long it has taken me to answer your last. All the best from both of us.

Yours ever,
Weldon

Reynal and Hitchcock published The Fall of the Magicians in the spring of 1947. After giving up the apartment in Greenwich Village, the Keeses moved to Brooklyn. Weldon did not plot his course with an eye toward "making it" in the New York manner: Brooklyn was outer darkness for ambitious New York writers. But even in Brooklyn the Keeses did not isolate themselves and Weldon continued to cock his ear for gossip to report to Norris Getty, in return for Norris's careful editing of his poems. Much involved with painting now

as well as with writing, Weldon quit his newsreel job to freelance as reviewer and filmmaker.

144 Willow Street
Brooklyn 2, N.Y.
16 November 1947

Dear Norris,

Thanks for your thoughts on the poems. I'm beginning to give in to you on "The Upstairs Room"; I keep looking at the poem first one way & then the other (with and without the phrase "stare till the eyeballs burn"), and your idea of removing it makes more & more sense. At the moment the poem is at the Partisan Review; so I'll have to wait for them to reject it, a not unlikely development. Have I written you that they want to kiss and make up after all these years? I had a letter from William Phillips, the only one of the four editors with whom I've had any friendly social dealings in some years, asking for something. I sent them those three you just had, and "Interregnum," the war poem you liked—previously entitled "Poem," because I couldn't think of a title at the time. If they take any of these I shall be vastly surprised; but if they want to be friendly, I'll try to cajole my hostility a little. [. . .]

The party Frank Taylor threw for Spender had a peculiar, undefinable and traumatic quality of horror that I shall not soon forget.* The main idea seemed to be to pack every available square foot of the Taylor house with people, and the more celebrities the better. The house is not small, as Village houses go. There were people there you never expected to see, like Graham Greene, looking like a pasty elderly edition of one of his weaker heroes; and people you thought were permanently settled in sanatoria, like Jean Stafford, looking more ravaged and nervous than you had thought possible; and people you thought were in Europe, like Janet Flanner; and people who did not quite seem to fit in to a party for Stephen Spender, like Clifton Fadiman and Max Lerner. And then all the old familiar sights at parties like that: Allen Tate getting drunk and H. R. Hays giving his facial tics a furious and unremitting workout.—I don't know what it was about

*At one point, late in the evening, Spender was sitting out in the hallway, quite alone, on the cooling radiator, his head in his hands.

that party, but everyone was so *nervous*. Everyone's nervousness got on everyone else's nerves; after a while I began to think I was in worse shape than anyone there, but on reflection I don't see how this could be true.—When Ann was upstairs talking to Frank Taylor's wife, Mrs. Taylor was holding a bottle of some patent medicine. After a lengthy conversation she said, "I've got to take this medicine down to Miss Flanner. On the label it describes what it will relieve, among other things flatulence, and that's what Miss Flanner is suffering from."—I got to talking to Peter deVries, who is now on the *New Yorker*, in charge of poetry. But he said the poetry side of things did not really intrigue him very much; it was the gag writing he liked better; he has been working as a gag writer for the cartoonists, all of whom, it develops, have run out of ideas and are being fed gags by such as Peter. The only one who still uses his own brain is Alan Dunn.—Well, there was a lot more about that party, but writing about it is beginning to bring it back in all its full-blown hideousness; so forgive me if I cut myself off.—When people left, they said, What a lovely party! Thank you so much. See you soon.

A couple of days ago, when I was uptown, I was waiting on the corner of Sixth Avenue and Forty-Fifth Street for the lights to change when I became aware of the familiarity of the fat neck on the man in front of me. It was Edmund Wilson all right, and I walked part way across town with him, to the *New Yorker*. He has gotten fatter and much older, but was in one of his rare moods of affability, and kept telling me I ought to resurrect that old project of mine for an anthology of satirical poetry. I asked him if he had read Trilling's novel, remembering that he and Trilling don't get along, or at any rate, that Edmund is not fond of Trilling. "Dreadful! Shocking!" he began to mutter in that Princeton-Reginald Owen accent of his. "One of the worst novels I ever tried to read! Just skipped through the last part, simply couldn't face it, etc., etc."—I sort of liked the book, myself, even though Ann is in large agreement with Wilson. I suppose the fact that I once knew Whittaker Chambers pretty well, who is the obvious model for one of the characters, can explain a lot of the fascination I felt for the novel.

I liked better Lindley Hubbell's new book, which came

from him in the mail the other day. I read it three times in manuscript, and read it again last night; he seems to be the only person around these days who can make use, in poetry, of commonplace everyday experience. Excepting, always, W. C. Wms.

Last month I thought I had an ulcer. As it turned out, I didn't, and so far as I know, haven't; but it is not fun even having the idea. My stomach has been more or less on the fritz ever since my days on Time—that great despoiler of bodies & souls; things finally got to the point where I went to the doctor, who sent me to an x-ray man. It was a bad day. They don't let you eat any breakfast or drink any water, and it takes all day. Most of the time I sat around in an unpleasant little room, dressed only in one of those white Dr. Kildare gowns (it wouldn't fasten properly in the back) talking to other patients who kept drifting in and out. They all seemed to have far more horrible things wrong with their stomachs than I had; one man, it had just been discovered, had a stomach that was upside down; it was moving up into his diaphragm and he bled a lot. He told me he hadn't had anything to eat in three days, which made my own miseries seem very piddling indeed.—Every so often I would have to drink some barium and they would take pictures; then I would come back in the room and wait until the time came for me to drink more barium and stretch out on the table. There was nothing to read in the room except for a forbidding textbook on ailments of an incredibly distasteful nature (with many illustrations), and a copy of *Goodbye, Mr. Chips*. I read half of *Goodbye, Mr. Chips* that afternoon, while there were no fellow sufferers around to talk with; I can report that it is very poor reading, at least under those circumstances.

I am supposed to relax, and every so often I take a teaspoonful of some evil-looking black medicine. They tell me that my stomach is an organically sound organ, but I wonder. I worry about how to relax. The doctor couldn't tell me.

The enclosed poem requires a little history along with it, maybe. Perhaps I wrote you that Sam Kootz [who had a commercial art gallery] is getting out a book, with examples by all of his artists; and he has asked various writers to write poems or prose pieces or articles for each artist. I did one on Moth-

erwell, but Goldwater, the editor of the Magazine of Art, wanted it for that publication; so, since the book is to be called *Women*, and all the paintings are “about” women, and, moreover, since all the other writers except me seemed to take off on creative tacks rather than writing about the painters, I was asked to do the same. This poem is the result. This is the only time I have ever written a poem for an “occasion”; curious to know what you think.

I’m going to try to stay away from a regular job as long as I can, unless something so tempting that I can’t resist it comes along. I paint every day, and have been writing more that I have in years. And money has been coming in, sometimes in surprising amounts. The Tiger’s Eye took “The Furies,” and paid me \$96 for it!—Have you seen that magazine, by the way? All that potatoes and no meat.

Your schedule makes me dizzy when I think about it. I’m anxious to hear all the details; perhaps you can give us an account, of Proustian exactitude and amplification, when you get down next month.

We saw Judith Anderson tearing the roof off the National Theatre yesterday. *Medea* is very well done, with exceptions all over the place, but her performance didn’t strike me as quite the triumph that all the newspaper boys would have it.

Ann sends her best.

Yours ever,
Weldon

144 Willow Street
Brooklyn 2
4 March 1948

Dear Norris,

First, Mary McCarthy’s story I promised you. You may have heard (I think Sweeney mentioned it when I was in Boston) that Spender lined up a lot of people for a poetry conference at Sarah Lawrence a few weeks back. Don’t ask me what the purpose of it was; but the undeclared intent was apparently to include throngs of people who know nothing about poetry, whatever their other abilities in the literary world may be (William Phillips, Lionel Trilling, etc.), academ-

ics like Donald Stauffer and Norman Holmes Pearson, poets who have not written any poetry for years (Louise Bogan, Robert Fitzgerald, etc.), poets who don't write much poetry (Marianne Moore), and characters such as Mary McCarthy, who don't seem to fit into any of my classifications. I seem to have left out the Gregory's, Karl Shapiro (who sent regrets by telegram; said he had "neuralgia of the knee"), Auden (who sent similar regrets: "neuralgia of the back"); Mary said that F. O. Matthiessen also wired he couldn't make it; she thought he was suffering from neuralgia of the brain.—All this in introductory. The affair went on for two days, and some of the people stayed in the dormitories overnight. One was Marianne Moore. She went upstairs early; and Mary was sent up by someone to tell her not to worry about getting up for breakfast: they would send her something on a tray. When Mary knocked at the door, Miss M. answered it in a state of dishabille; she wore only a pair of old pink bloomers and a little white shirtwaist. She seemed to want to talk and, a bizarre figure in this costume, which she did not bother to cover, she discussed various topics of the hour with Mary for quite some time. Mary says Miss Moore has two words that she uses continually; one of them is "generous" and the other is "courageous" and she uses both of them with a steady undercurrent of maliciousness: "Wasn't it *generous* of President Taylor to make that fine introduction for Mr. Spender?" "Wasn't it *courageous* of poor Louise Bogan to come way out here from 168th Street, the poor dear?" etc., etc.—Well, next day, Mary was talking to Spender, who had with him a new autograph book Ruthven Todd had given him. He was very happy with this possession and had been going around getting the poets and nonpoets to write little inscriptions in it for him. Some of them had even written poems therein. "And I want you to see the nice things Marianne Moore wrote in my book," said the author of *Ruins and Visions*. He showed it to her. "To courageous Mr. Spender," Miss Moore had written in her rather spidery hand. Spender was terribly pleased by it.

There seem to be an awful lot of parties around here lately. Sunday we went to one someone threw for Jean Malaquais, who just got back from Europe. It throbbed with people from

splinter Marxist outfits, Sidney Hooks, Dwight Macdonalds, etc., and turned up an intense and rather handsome little man who turned out to be Michael Fraenkel, the guy Henry Miller exchanged so many letters with on Hamlet. He seized my hand with marked avidity and told me that that review I did in the Times on Miller was just the ticket, which rather took me aback, since I had thought that he and Miller were still bosom pals. Not at all, said Fraenkel: Miller's old cronies think he is a sell-out and getting terribly stuffy to boot.—We wrenched ourselves away from this party (the liquor was beginning to run out and the hostess, whom Malaquais says was "some sort of an activist," was getting very nervous) and went on to another one at George Davis's. Here one entered another world: smooth publishers' young men, Nancy Walker, Josephine Premice, Truman Capote, Dawn Powell, several very creepy fairies, and an appalling woman left over from *Nightwood*. Capote said to me, "Why don't you want to be a success? I can tell from the way you act you don't want to be a success. You're like Newton Arvin. Why, you're a much better poet than that old Robert Lowell. I just feel terrible. Nobody likes my novel that I want to have like it. All the wrong people are praising it. I just got back from Haiti. In San Francisco I stayed with the Saroyans—" In a large cage by the piano, Davis's green parrot stirred uneasily, and Oliver Smith went over and said something to it in consoling tones.

Have you seen Fiedler's remarks on Frost in the current PR? Now we're beginning to get someplace.

Bought a record player finally. It's one of those table models in a very simple cabinet of light wood that Victor made up particularly for dealers. Seems to me superior to Magnavox. Maybe you've seen it. A couple of days after I got it, the Nation came out with one of those pieces Haggin does now and then on phonographs; he picked it as one of the best. I was lucky to get a slightly used one at about half-price. Anxious to have you hear it. Now we're spending money like drunken sailors on albums. The Lee Wiley album of Harold Arlen songs is one of my most cherished acquisitions; have you heard it?

Wrote a new poem about Robinson the other day and will send it to you very shortly; I'm a little blank about it at the

moment.—That's a beautiful poem of W. C. Williams in the last PR. I also liked a new long one by William Plomer in New Writing. [. . .].

Hope you can get down during Spring vacation. Are you still interested in renting a house this summer? We'd still like to. If you're agreeable, I'll get busy on it as soon as the weather gets decent enough to look around on weekends.

Do you know of a decent translation of Propertius? The one I'm reading is not so good.

Yours ever,
Weldon

Norris Gerry and the Keeses did, in fact, take a place in Provincetown in the summer of 1948. Weldon played the piano and sang at one of the local bars, to the delight of his painter and writer friends. In October he was awarded the Oscar Blumenthall Prize for recent contributions to Poetry. The New Yorker was continuing to accept his pieces too, and leading artists were encouraging him in his painting. In the Fall he wrote a poem for Hans Hofmann to be included in a Paris catalogue of Hofmann's work. After a spectacularly successful summer on the Cape in 1949—Weldon organized a series of Forums on the arts for July and August that included such people as Fritz Bultman, George Biddle, Marcel Breuer, Adolph Gottlieb, Hans Hofmann, Karl Knaths, Dwight Macdonald and others—they returned to Manhattan and a very cold warehouse apartment near Anton Myrer, not yet famous as a novelist, and his artist wife, Judith Rothschild. Disappointed at not getting a third volume of verse published, miserably uncomfortable in their loft apartment, depressed by his own health and Ann's debilitating illnesses, Weldon yet reported on the literary life. In the late winter, with Elizabeth Bishop he visited Ezra Pound, incarcerated at St. Elizabeth's Hospital as mentally incapable of standing trial for treason.

179 Stanton Street
New York 2
18 March 1950

Dear Norris,

I have a fearful hangover from too many of Conrad Aiken's orange blossoms, but will see if I can subdue this type-

writer anyway. It's idiotic to try to keep up with Conrad's glass-lifting; he's such a rumpot of long-standing that I should know better. Although I must say that Ann has come through this morning with flying colors and says she's feeling no pain. The Aikens found a wonderful little apartment with a garden for \$14 a month, the arrangements having been taken care of through a lady novelist, a nymphomaniac and a friend of theirs whose lovers are usually drawn from the ranks of longshoremen, truck drivers, plumbers, etc. One of her blacksmith friends ran down the apartment, and the Aikens plan to use it only occasionally, whenever they have enough money to come to town. Conrad got going on Malcolm Lowry last night. He turned up in Cambridge years ago, at the age of 18, with a suitcase full of dirty socks and a ukelele, a great admirer of *Blue Voyage*, and already at that age a pronounced alcoholic. Lowry's father is a millionaire, and for years Aiken was hired by the old man to look after Lowry. The Aikens were with him in Mexico during the *Under the Volcano* period, and Conrad says that he is the original of the movie director character.

We saw *The Cocktail Party*. Our only visit to the theatre this year. I don't want to be too extreme, but I thought it was one of the worst plays ever to get on the boards. It's appallingly amateurish and redolent of corn. I can't recall anything worse by a previously first-rate writer. He *uses* everything, and uses everything badly; now, instead of Swift and the Elizabethans and the French symbolists, it's Chesterton, Shaw, Evelyn Waugh and Frederick Lonsdale. A sorry affair. And someone has just told me that the new Hemingway novel represents a similar comedown.

The winter seems to stretch on endlessly, and it's been a brutal one for us. The place never gets really warm, and for a while the stove went completely on the blink. For a couple of days we huddled around our electric heater and another one we borrowed from the Myrers. We are thinking very seriously of taking off for Florida or Mexico next fall. Meanwhile I count the days until the 1st of June. Lately everything has got to be more and more of an effort (I suppose fighting the cold hasn't helped any) and I have one hell of a time grinding out the things I have to do: the *Nation* pieces hang over me like

so many vultures, and I seem to be losing my touch on the film scripts: each one is like a trip to the dentist. The ms. of *A Late History* has just come back with a pleasant letter of rejection from Macmillan. So it goes.

I had to go to Washington for a couple of days on a script I was doing at the time. It turned out in typical army fashion: the woman who was supposed to be technical advisor on the film turned out to have had no advance warning of my visit, and also it developed that she was no longer technical advisor on the film, having been supplanted by a nurse stationed at Governor's Island. The trip was not a total loss by any means, though: I looked up Elizabeth Bishop, a very nice person, and she asked me if I'd like to see Pound. She had to go over to the hospital the next afternoon to take him some books from the Library of Congress. He receives visitors from 2 to 4 every afternoon, and Mrs. Pound, who lives in Washington, goes to see him daily. I found the experience somewhat inhuman, rather like visiting a museum, but certainly not an experience to have missed. He "receives" at the end of a corridor in the hospital, which is a pretty gloomy affair, with catatonics and dementia praecox cases slithering about; but he certainly keeps up a spirit. Very lively and brisk, and his eyes go through you like knives. He started out by talking about some new little magazine, *Imagi*, the young editor of which he seems to have under his thumb; and there were lots of references to "the Brits," "the yids" and "the estimable Stevens" and "the admirable Eliot." When Elizabeth, who had seen *The Cocktail Party* in New York, told him she thought it was pretty poor stuff, he seemed pleased. (Pound calls her "Liz Bish," which she doesn't care for; nor does she care much for Pound, regarding him as a pretty dangerous character, through his influence—particularly the anti-Semitism—on the young.) Sometimes he has a good deal of trouble remembering things, gets started on a story and lapses into something else that's pretty irrelevant. Just the method of the Cantos, I guess. There are even sentences that end "and . . ." But he's far from crazy, I'd say, though an egomaniac of the first water. The people who knew him back in 1912 say he's just the same as he's always been. I felt very curious when Elizabeth and Mrs. Pound and I left the hospital—Pound shooed us out

promptly at four, so as “not to get anybody sore”—and we waited on the road for Mrs. Pound’s bus to come along; it was an experience hard to grasp, and more “unreal” somehow than the mere previous knowledge of Pound’s predicament. It was a cold day; we could see the Capitol dome in the distance; and there was Pound, waving goodbye to us from the window of his cell.

On your recommendation we took in “Twelve O’Clock High,” and liked it. I agree with you about Jagger: a very moving performance.

That’s a good suggestion of yours on the last poem I sent—to call it “La Vita Nuova,” which has been done. Haven’t been able to do any other poems since that one.

Hope all goes well with you. Ann sends her love.

Yours ever,
Weldon

POSTSCRIPT: *In the Fall of 1950, after one last summer on the Cape, Ann and Weldon Kees abandoned the East Coast as they said. Weldon wrote to Maurice Johnson (26 August 1950): “My romance with New York City is over; last winter was the last straw. A nice place to visit, etc.” William Baziotes said later that Weldon “viewed his departure from New York as fleeing a stricken city.”*

Subsequently Ann thought the move a bitter mistake, for it separated Weldon—and herself—from a world in which they had more or less flourished. A bit defensively Weldon explained the move to Malcolm Cowley:

We came out here almost two years ago & are glad we did. I was around San Francisco many years ago & loved it. New York got to be too much of a struggle, at least for me, and one that avail-eth close to naught. Mostly got tired of all the dirt and darkness, and getting burned pieces of the Mirror in my left eye every time I went out of the house, and seeing so many people turning sad and/or crazy. Some of it had to do with the fact that we were living, if you can call it that, during the last winter there, in a loft on the lower East Side, poor as hell, with a kerosene stove that only heated about a thirtieth of the room. We damn near froze. (3 November 1952)

Perhaps two of the “people turning sad and/or crazy” were themselves; but for a time life was warm and bright in California. Be-

friendred by Kenneth Rexroth, the center of a San Francisco literary circle, Weldon quickly established himself as one of the poets of the region. His paintings got two one-man shows in San Francisco, and he wrote lyrics and some music for local jazz groups. He made an experimental film, Hotel Apex, he worked with Gregory Bateson and Jurgen Ruesch on several research projects involving still and moving photography, and he participated in various theater groups in San Francisco. But in 1954, the Keeses' private life fell apart disastrously. Weldon wrote to Conrad Aiken of the most eventful week-end of his life.

22 September 1954

Dear Conrad,

My life has become so hectic of late, working, on a fairly tame day, eighteen hours, that it hasn't been possible for me to write you before this. When I wired, an excellent little theatre group (not so damn little, either: the old & famed Bella Union Theatre, the most famous nightclub, gambling joint & whorehouse of the Barbary Coast days now is a sounding-board for Moliere, Eliot, Synge, Thurber, Shakespeare & other such promising fellows, and the company numbers fifty) was very immediately interested in *Mr. Arcularis*. The immediate heat is off, but Joyce Lancaster, one of the directors, is an ardent fan of yours and knows some of the people who did the play when it was performed in either Washington or Boston, I forget which. I'll see to it that good care is taken of the script.

I have been through a lot of rather grave personal difficulties, about which I'll be writing you very shortly. Just now I am terribly snowed under and must get ready to fly to Los Angeles. Briefly, Ann has been on a job in Berkeley for the last couple of years so strenuous and so wacky that things got pretty rough. I tried to get her to quit the job, but something or other—I'm not at all sure even now what or who it was—held her to it with a sort of fascination, I guess you would call it bordering on the pathological. About eight or nine months ago she got to drinking more than you, me, Malcolm Lowry and Tallulah Bankhead put together. I have never known what to do about any of the alcoholics I've known but to let them drink. I occasionally tried to talk to her about it; she

was very touchy on the subject, on a couple of occasions said that she would try to cut down on the sauce, but every night it was the same thing. Then I began to see a lot of paranoid symptoms developing: the phone where she worked was tapped, our telephone at the apartment was tapped, all that sort of thing. It was very difficult for her to drag herself out of the house to see people and raised objections when I wanted to have people over for dinner or the evening. Over the 4th of July weekend she went completely paranoid; she drank continuously, and I was unable to get any psychiatric help, since all the boys and girls were off at the seashore and the mountains for that lovely weekend. Two nights a nice MD next door shot her full of sodium amytal, and occasionally she would have a lucid moment. Most of the time she was not sure who she was, who I was (sometimes I seemed to be one of her brothers), and there was a deep certainty on her part that FBI men were outside the house. Well, Conrad, this ain't the half of it; finally, on Tuesday morning I got hold of one of the few psychiatrists around here of any real help on such cases and she finally agreed to sign herself in at Langley Porter Clinic. She improved greatly there, but left against advice after three weeks. We are now separated and she has agreed to a divorce, and I hope she will be all right. We were married for sixteen years, and a lot of it was not so good. It's too bad that her life could not have been one long summer on the cape, because she was at her best then. [. . .]

The welcome mat is out. My job with US Public Health went out with a whimper: Eisenhower is pulling out the rug from under all psychiatric and communications research that might indicate that there is more than one way to drive a person crazy. I am freelancing on writing and movie making, and, at the moment, am bushed but in good spirits.

Hoping that you and Mary are the same—everybody's bushed—and with apologies for any distress I may have caused you by my wire, I am

With love,

The divorce went through without a hitch, and Weldon's life became even more filled with feverish activity than before the separation.

In December Poems 1947–1954 was published by Adrian Wilson and endorsed in a blurb by Malcolm Cowley. Wallace Stevens put himself on the patron list. On the title page Kees quoted a fragment from The Marble Faun by Nathaniel Hawthorne: “. . . those dark caverns into which all men must descend, if they would know anything beneath the surface and illusive pleasures of existence.” The Kees world was winding up. Lou Pollack, the director of the Peridot Gallery, wrote to him in January, 1955, “You talk of so many projects that sometimes I wonder that you haven’t tried architecture. Or have you already?”

But Kees did not stay the course. Subject from early youth to extreme swings in mood which both he and his friends recognized as cyclical, in 1955 he disappeared. In July, his car was discovered on the north approach to the Golden Gate Bridge where it had been abandoned in the deep fog of mid-summer. He has not been seen or heard from since. His book with Jurgen Ruesch M.D. called Non-verbal Communication (1956) was published, some of his lyrics and music got a brief hearing, his pictures were exhibited, and his poems and essays were anthologized, but Kees was gone. The promise of a major career was cut off in midpassage. Perhaps like Ambrose Bierce, whom he talked of, he had gone to Mexico to “start again”—he proposed to one of his friends that they go off like this; and he had talked of Mexico to his mother. But who can say? After 1955 the Weldon Kees of Nebraska, New York, and San Francisco drops from sight, leaving poems, stories, painting, and a sizable packet of remarkable letters.

For twenty years Kees had been at the cutting edge of his time, and with success so imminent, why did he withdraw? Malcolm Cowley wrote to Conrad Aiken about him in November, quoting a letter from Kenneth Rexroth. Clearly the national literary-artistic community was distressed. Rexroth told Cowley who told Aiken—

I should say Weldon killed himself out of intolerable madness—a manic-depressive psychosis which because it took socially approved forms was not recognized as delusional. ‘Looky Papa I’m a Time cover man.’ I was very fond of Weldon—knew him all his life as a writer. New Directions first published him.

Donald Justice edited Kees’s collected poems in 1960, revised his edition in 1975; Dana Gioia published selections from his fiction in 1983. A volume of his letters is to appear shortly.

RICHMOND LATTIMORE

The Idea of a Town

There had to be a water-tower in a grove on the highest point, and at the flattest the railroad yards and the stations; at least one street a hundred feet wide running

through the entire town, to the ghost edges laid out in blocks with nothing there but the sidewalks and hydrants. The schools, unravished still by the moderns; the little

playground with its swings. The modest cluster of stores and offices desperately down town. The movie house. A handful of little apartment buildings. Beyond them, acre

on acre, on the straight streets (Race, Main, Front, Poplar), the houses of the people, two story, with tiny lawns, and swings on the porches. Remember? This was America's

unimaginative matrix of all our imagination and dreamstuff.

LOUIS SIMPSON

The Flaubert Pavilion

1

"The Flaubert Museum is closed."

"And the house at Croisset?"

"That is open," she conceded.

The bus drove through the streets of Rouen,
then down a hill.

The Hirondelle

used to go rattling down, carrying Emma
to a rendez-vous with Léon . . .
and slowly back, with the hideous
blind beggar trudging beside it
singing about a young girl in love.

I had a vision of Croisset.
There would be fields and haystacks,
a smell of apples fermenting,
stone walls, and roofs of thatch.

The bus skirted a harbor
with freighters and tankers tied up,
and a forest of cranes . . . where Félicité
saw horses dangling in mid-air
and thought she was losing her mind.

Suddenly, next to a municipal building,
the bus came to a stop. "Croisset,"
said the driver, and got off.

2

A sign pointed to "The Flaubert Pavilion."
 We walked . . . along a row of houses
 that faced the road and the Seine.
 Then the high wall of a factory . . .
 A truck came out, carrying large rolls,
 and there were bales of old newspaper
 in the factory yard.

We crossed over and walked by the Seine.
 There was no sidewalk, only rusting rails.
 We tried walking on the ties for a while,
 then crossed back again. Finally
 we came to the pavilion. It was closed.
 From twelve to two, said a sign.

Very well, it would give us time
 for lunch. And we were hungry.

3

There was a crossing in the distance
 with a traffic light.
 Perhaps there would also be shops.

We walked toward it. Cars and trucks went by.
 Apparently no one ever stopped
 in this road. We were the only people.
 The houses seemed uninhabited.

Then we came to a sign . . . "Le Pulque."
 The restaurant, for such it was,
 had bright yellow, Mexican walls.

A dozen people seated at the tables
 were putting the food away—
 four courses with wine, forty francs.
 We ordered *Quenelles de Brochet*.

The owner came over to see how we'd liked them.
 He was a stout, fair man with a moustache,
 in his shirt sleeves, *vrai Normand*.

The walls were dedicated to the chase
 with hunting horns and shotguns.
 I thought of Flaubert sitting there,
 eavesdropping.

"I tell you I see her
 sneaking over there through the fields."

"Go on, you're making it up."

"Am I? The other morning, at daybreak,
 just as I was sighting a bird,
 up she popped. I gave her what for!
 She could have got herself shot."

4

We rang. A dog barked
 and an elderly woman came to the door.
 She seemed surprised to have visitors.

The house of Flaubert no longer existed,
 she informed us. It stood on ground
 now occupied by the paper factory.
 The pavilion was all that remained.

We gave her the small entrance fee.
 She thanked us, and led the way.

Most of his furniture was in the museum.
 There were only a few objects of interest
 apportioned here by the State.

Some pages of writing under glass,
 the "comice agricole,"

most of the sentences crossed out
and a few words written in . . .

The “working cabinet of Flaubert” . . .
clay pipes, looking frail and pitiful,
a pair of slippers, a bronze Buddha,
and—a real treasure—a parrot
said to have been Félicité’s.
A green, ordinary-looking bird . . .
yet it had served as *succedaneum*
of the Spirit, and served Flaubert,
I think, as his final statement:
it is not what a thing is
but what you feel about it that counts.

5

A French friend to whom I told this story,
when I complained about the missing house,
said, “The French are like that.
They have so much, they don’t give a damn.”

A medical man disagreed.
He said, you can’t argue with Progress.

And the need for paper is insatiable.
Hundreds of newspapers and magazines
every day demand their tons.
Reams of paper are needed in offices,
for government, and education.
Without a steady supply of paper
he wouldn’t have his medical journals
and I wouldn’t have my books.

For industry . . . They even make houses
out of paper in Japan.

All this weighed in the balance with
sentimentality . . . preserving the house

of a writer who, let's face it,
 is not to everyone's taste.
 A woman, married to a doctor,
 commits adultery and runs him into debt . . .

Society would be none the worse
 if Madame Bovary had been recycled.

The Naturalist and the Volcano

Sometimes I climb to the top of the hill
 with a book. It is peaceful here
 in the circle made by the ruins.

In Roman times, somewhere on the sides
 of this promontory "that divides the wind,"
 stood two villas. "Comedy" and "Tragedy"
 Pliny called them—the Younger Pliny
 whose *Letters* I have been reading.
 There were two Plinys . . .
 Pliny who wrote a *Natural History*
 and his nephew who wrote letters.

The older Pliny died in an eruption
 of Vesuvius. As his nephew tells it,
 the "savant" wanted a closer look . . .
 and to come to the help of a friend.
 So, being an admiral, he ordered out a ship.

"Ashes and hot stones were falling
 and the captain wanted to turn back,
 but he said, 'Fortune befriends the brave,
 carry me to Pompionanus!'"

On arriving he called for a bath,
 then sat down to dinner, talking informally

to set their fears at rest.
 And all that night while Vesuvius
 was thundering, Pliny slept.
 Those who were close to the door
 could hear him "breathing heavily
 because he was pretty fat."

The day dawned black as pitch
 and the house was shaking to the foundations.
 So, says the writer, "balancing reasons,"
 they decided to make a run for it,
 and wrapped napkins around their heads . . .

But the sea was against them,
 so Pliny lay down. There was a smell of sulphur,
 he struggled to stand . . .
 Days later his body was found beneath the ashes.

Was this Tragedy? I don't think
 that Pliny would have thought so,
 being a naturalist, caught up
 in the study of his subject,
 the volcano . . . "like a pine tree
 shooting up to a great height,
 the trunk spreading at the top
 into branches . . . at one moment white,
 at another dark and spotted."

JOSEPH EPSTEIN

Schlifkin on My Books

Fortunately, I happened to be in the room when the police called to inform my wife that my body had been dragged from Lake Michigan. "There must be some mistake, officer," I heard my wife say, "but Samuel Kaplan, my husband, is right here with me now, and very much alive." I picked up the phone, identified myself, and asked what the hell was going on. The police officer, a man named Howard Levine, told me that they had fished a corpse out of the lake roughly four hours before, and the corpse was a man wearing a grey tweed overcoat, a Hickey-Freeman by make, with the name S. S. Kaplan sewn into the lining. I was S. S. Kaplan, no question about it; there was no question either about who was wearing the overcoat. Schlifkin was wearing the overcoat, Louis Schlifkin, my customer, crazy Louie. I know because I gave the coat to him. "Officer," I said, "the name of the man you found in the lake is Louis Schlifkin. I would be grateful if you'd see to it that he got a decent Jewish burial. I'll take care of the expenses involved."

I first met Schlifkin some three years ago. I was in my office, going through the orders that had come in that morning's mail, when Cora, the colored gal who was then my floor lady, came in to say that a new customer was making a terrible mess of the stock and that she didn't seem to be able to stop him. I strode out of my office, Cora following, and in our sales room saw a small man, my own size, rummaging through our stock, breaking open boxes, going into cartons, digging in where he didn't belong, and leaving, as Cora said, a terrible mess. He was wearing a navy pea coat and a woolen watch cap. He was stocky, and when he turned to face me I noted that one of the temple pieces of his glasses was held together by electrician's tape. One of his bottom teeth was missing; his nails were ragged and filthy.

"Look here," I said, "if you plan to be a customer of ours,

you'd better behave like it. I won't have you handling our merchandise as if it were garbage."

"So what's matter with you?" he said. "Didn't *yentz* your wife last night?"

I don't think I have been spoken to that way in forty years. And with my employees standing about, I don't think I have been spoken to that way ever.

"All right," I found myself saying, pointing with my free hand to the door. "You—out! And I don't want to see you in here again until you're ready to handle yourself like a gentleman."

"Go screw yourself!" he said, picked up two shopping bags he had brought in with him, and walked out. As he left, it occurred to me to wonder if he had put any merchandise in those shopping bags.

Back at my desk I thought, Do I need this aggravation? I concluded, fairly quickly, that, yes, I do. I was then sixty-eight years old. Believe me I'm not bragging when I say I don't need the money. My kids aren't in the business. My daughter Sharon is married to a dentist who does very well. My son, Marvin, is a professor of philosophy in California. The philosophy he teaches doesn't sound like philosophy to me; he says he is interested in something called "the problem of language." What exactly is the problem, I have asked him, but I've never been able to understand his explanation. In any case, like his sister, he appears to be settled in life and, from all I can tell, reasonably happy. My wife's sister's oldest boy, Sheldon, works for me. Two years ago I made him a minor partner. Like me, he never went to college, but he's a go-getter. Not yet thirty, he drives a little Mercedes convertible that I'm told costs upward of twenty grand. I've asked him not to park it in front of the place. It sends off wrong signals. It might give our customers the idea that we are doing very well—which, between you and me and the lamppost, we are. I myself drive a Pontiac, two years old. I'm not sure I could tell you what color it is. It's good enough. I'm too old to show off.

But I spoke of needing the aggravation. The truth is I love this business. I love to come down in the morning—I usually arrive forty-five or so minutes before everyone else—and

straighten up the stock, go through the mail, page through the *Wall Street Journal*, get myself set for the day ahead. The name of our place is Bonnie Beth Enterprises. People ask me, Who's Bonnie Beth? My wife? My daughter? I tell them it's a long story. In fact, it's a short one. When, thirty-odd years ago, I first went into this business, I had a partner. Bonnie and Beth were the names of his two daughters. We were together less than five years and I caught him cheating. Petty cash, postage money, nickel and dime stuff, maybe it came to a lousy two, three thousand a year. Still, once you catch someone, trust is shot. I told him, either you buy me out or I buy you out, but I don't think we can go on together any more. He cried like a baby. He took the money I bought him out with and bought eleven laundromats, none of which did any good. He was a diabetic, and died four years ago—a horrible death. Life isn't easy.

We started out in costume jewelry. We were jobbers. Bought most of our stuff from Providence, Rhode Island. Before long, though, that dried up. So we began importing from Hong Kong and Taiwan. In recent years, I've been buying close-outs—the left-overs from failed businesses. Earrings, cufflinks, pendants, wires, you name it, if the price is right I buy it and can find a way to unload it. I'll let you in on a little secret: buying is where you make your money. We buy in volume, hundreds of dozens, even, if the item can be had at the right price, hundreds of grosses. We pay our bills; we have cash on hand; if the deal looks right, we move. At the moment, for example, I am sitting on two hundred dozen neckties that I bought for eight cents a piece. I'm told that the neckties are too wide, they're out of fashion. Fashion, smashion—at eight cents a piece, how can you go wrong? Eventually, I'll unload them.

Some three weeks later Cora came in to say that that man who had caused the trouble was back. I had told her to alert me if he returned. "O. K., Cora," I said, "I'll handle him."

I picked up an order book and walked into our sales room. There he was, still in the pea coat and wool cap, still the electrician's tape on his glasses, still with the two shopping bags.

"I'm ready to be nice," he said, the missing lower tooth showing in his smile.

"Good," I said. "Now what can we do for you?"

Filling out his order I learned that his name was Louis Schlifkin and that he lived on Milwaukee Avenue, about three blocks from our place of business, in a Polish working-class neighborhood that was beginning to go Spanish. I also learned that this Schlifkin was a man in love with merchandise. He shopped with such excitement, such abandon, that at least twice—once when he ripped open a box of cheap Japanese binoculars and another time when he nearly destroyed the display card for a grouping of friendship rings—I had to tell him to take it easy.

"How much I got?" he wanted to know. "How much it come to?"

"So far, \$183.75."

"Whaddya got good for another twenty bucks?" He was obviously going to spend every cent he had on him. At the close, when he paid his bill, mostly in greasy fives and singles, he had maybe three or four dollars left. I walked him to the door.

"Thank you for your business, Mr. Schlifkin."

He picked up his shopping bags, and, as he pushed through the door, over his shoulder said, "*Abi gesunt, Shmuel.*"

Soon Schlifkin began coming in two and three times a week. Sometimes he would buy eighty or ninety dollars worth of merchandise, sometimes forty or fifty. Once he came in for an order totaling \$18.62. I learned that he was selling it on Maxwell Street—"Jewtown," as the colored called it. He had no car, so he would schlep a card table and his shopping bags on the bus, and set up shop there on the street. Did he show a profit? Maybe a small one. I could of course tell Louie Schlifkin's holdings almost to the penny by the size of his orders. I always waited on him myself.

How old was Schlifkin? I'm not so sure. I made him out to be in his late fifties. He could have been younger. He still had a full head of hair, and it was black. But his face was sallow; it showed all the traces of having lived a hard life. He wore gym shoes even in the winter. I learned that he came from Cleveland and that he had a brother there in the furniture business. He talked horribly about him. "A miserable prick,

my brother,” he once said to me. “He wouldn’t give you the time of day.” He also had a sister in Cleveland, who was married to a lawyer. Schlifkin, obviously, was the family black sheep. Later I learned that his sister used to send him a monthly check to cover his living expenses. My guess is that this was done partly out of charity, partly to keep him out of Cleveland, where he might prove an embarrassment to the family.

One day, in the middle of a bitter winter week, Schlifkin came once more to buy. He seemed hesitant, a little nervous. “Shmuel,” he said, “I have a favor to ask.” He called me Shmuel, I called him Schlifkin. “Shmuel,” he said, “how about carrying me on the books for a hundred dollars credit? This past week, with the terrible lousy weather, has been a disaster. Whaddya say? Jew to Jew. I won’t crap out on you. You know I won’t screw you. I need you too much.”

“Schlifkin,” I said, “I give a man like you credit, I lose a customer. I make an enemy. You’ll never come back. It’s a big mistake. Believe me, I’ve seen it happen time and again.”

“Look, Shmuel, without the credit, I’m done for. Tapped out. Out of business.”

I thought a moment about it.

“All right. I’m putting you on the books for seventy-five dollars. But don’t disappoint me.”

“Shmuel,” he said, “you’re a mensch. I won’t forget it.”

Now you might wonder, Why did I say seventy-five dollars and not give Schlifkin the hundred dollars he asked for? I don’t know. Maybe I’ve been out on the street too long. I mean, what is twenty-five dollars to me. Between you and me, I give more than twenty thousand dollars a year to charity, forty thousand if you count Israeli bonds. Maybe I was only trying to show Schlifkin I wasn’t a complete soft touch. Maybe I didn’t want to lose him as a customer, not that his trade with us came to all that much. The truth is I had come to like Schlifkin—“Crazy Louie,” as my nephew had now begun to call him. Maybe he reminded me of what, if luck had sorted itself out differently, I myself might have been. I don’t know.

What happened I could have predicted. He paid back fifty of the seventy-five, and then the next week was back into us for the full seventy-five. Eventually I let his credit creep up to

\$200 and carried him pretty much permanently on the books for that. I set the ceiling at two hundred. What the hell! Did it really matter so much? Besides, by now I had made much more than that in profit in dealing with him.

And then, in November, Schlifkin didn't show up for two weeks. This was unusual. Was he, I wondered, in trouble? Did he skip out? Was he dead? Schlifkin had no phone, so there was no way of getting in touch with him. One morning when it was quiet in the place I decided to walk the three blocks to his apartment to see for myself. It was a grey day and we had had an early snow, and the streets were covered with that dark grunge, a combination of frozen snow and filth, that sometimes stays on the ground from November through April in Chicago. Walking over I thought, if Schlifkin were dead, who would even know about it?

His place was above a discount shoe store on Milwaukee Avenue. The hallway was dark, the stairway from the ground to the second floor was steep. I imagined Schlifkin schlepping his card table and shopping bags up and down it. There were no bells for tenants, so I walked up the stairs. The doors on the second floor had names scribbled on index cards taped to them: Rodriguez, Strazewski, Morales, and, at the end of the hall in the back, Schlifkin. I knocked on the door, waited, then knocked louder.

"Hold your goddam horses." It was Schlifkin. He came to the door in his pea coat, under which he had on a ripped sweatshirt and a pair of jockey shorts on which the elastic around the legs had long given out. As for his room, mess doesn't begin to describe it. Pipes ran around its low ceiling, from one of which Schlifkin had hung out to dry two tired looking pair of underwear pants and a flannel shirt. On a small table was a can of Heinz Vegetarian Beans with a spoon in it and the package from something called Twinkies. A milky film clung to a jelly jar. In the way of furniture the room had a bed—into which Schlifkin, having taken off his pea coat, now lay—an arm chair with the stuffing coming out of the seat cushion, and a small television set with a hanger for an antenna. There were a small sink and a hot plate but no refrigerator. The bathroom must have been somewhere down the hall. Schlifkin pulled a grimy blanket around him; his pillow had no pillow case.

"Where've you been?" I asked.

"I had an angina attack," he said.

"You have angina?"

"For the last four years, yeah."

"What do you do for it?"

"I go to Cook County Hospital. They give me pills. I lay low for a week or two and it goes away."

This awful room couldn't be helping much. How long had Schlifkin lived here? How many places like it had he lived in before? Something had to be done about this. This was no way for a man to live.

"How's business?" he asked. "What're the hot items?"

"Business could be better. Nothing much new. My import guy tells me he's holding four cases of mini-cameras, with the film, for me. Also lighters, a pretty good imitation of the old Ronsons. Otherwise, same old crap, what can I tell you?"

"What're you getting on the cameras?"

"To you," I said, "fifteen dollars a dozen."

"Sure—to everyone else twelve dollars a dozen."

"I'll hold back four dozen for you when they come in. The lighters you'll look at when you're back on your feet. I also have a deal upcoming on scatter pins that may be for you. Meanwhile, Schlifkin, can I do anything for you? You need money, food, what?"

"What I need's a new engraver. The old one's on the bum. Locketts, bracelets, lighters, it's scratching up everything it touches, though most of the time my high-class customers don't seem to notice."

"I'll get you an engraver, don't worry."

"I'll be in early next week. Hold the cameras, and don't forget the engraver, which I expect you to throw in for nothing."

When I got back to my place, I put in a call to Schlifkin's sister, Mrs. Jacob Rabin, in Shaker Heights, Ohio. I had her name and number from the credit form Schlifkin had filled out for us; she was his only reference.

A maid answered, then Mrs. Rabin came to the phone.

"Mrs. Rabin, my name is Samuel Kaplan. I'm a—er—business associate of your brother Louis Schlifkin. Please forgive my calling you, but your brother is ill. What's more, he's living in

terrible conditions, and I am wondering if there isn't anything to be done about it."

"What's wrong with Louis?" she said.

"He's had an angina attack. Did you know he had heart trouble?"

"I did, Mr. Kaplan, but I'm afraid I don't know what can be done. His brother and I send Louis a regular check every month, you know. Louis is a problem, Mr. Kaplan, a problem with no solution. I've asked him to come back to Cleveland, but he wants no part of it."

"Mrs. Rabin, he's living in a rat hole. He's a sick man. Something's got to be done."

"Mr. Kaplan, believe me when I say that there is nothing to be done. Louis is Louis. He's a terribly self-destructive man."

"Self-destructive?"

"Louis was my mother's favorite, you should know, Mr. Kaplan. But from the very beginning he was trouble to her and to the rest of us. She left him more than thirty-thousand dollars in her will. Louis went through it in less than a year. I sometimes think Louis is in competition with his older brother, to whom he doesn't even speak. No, Mr. Kaplan, I'm afraid that Louis is Louis, and there's nothing to be done about him but let him live his life the way he wants to."

"I see," I said.

"It's been very nice of you to call, Mr. Kaplan. And if Louis becomes very ill or needs more money for special care, I hope you'll let me know."

After hanging up, I thought about what Schlifkin's sister had said. Schlifkin was self-destructive? What could that mean? That he had had a long record of failure, I suppose. Or maybe that he worked against his own best interests. So we take bad luck and poor perception and put a label on it—self-destructive—and feel a little smarter? Or, in Schlifkin's sister's case, it gives a little heart's ease. But who made Schlifkin self-destructive? His mother, who maybe loved him too much? My own mother died when I was ten. Do I owe my success in life to that? Other men who have had mother love have gone on to great triumphs, I'm certain. What else did his sister say? Schlifkin was in competition with his brother. What did that explain? Who set up this competition? Who

gave Schlifkin a brother he couldn't hope to compete with, let alone defeat? Where was it fixed that Schlifkin was to be one of life's losers? The only thing that his sister said that made any sense to me was that Louis was Louis. Schlifkin was Schlifkin. But how did Schlifkin get to be Schlifkin? It's a serious question.

Schlifkin had recovered from his bout with angina and was coming in again regularly. One morning on my way out of our apartment, I noticed my wife had set aside a pile of clothes to give to Good Will. From it I fished my old grey tweed overcoat, a blue pinstripe suit, and two of my shirts, frayed a bit round the collars and with my monogram, S.S.K., over the pockets. Why not give these to Schlifkin? He was roughly my size. God knows he could use them. I put the clothes in a shopping bag and took off for the place.

Driving down I wondered if Schlifkin might not resent these clothes as charity. He thought of himself, comic as it may seem, as a businessman. Ours was a business relationship. One businessman doesn't, after all, give another businessman his used clothes. Still, Schlifkin could use these things. If he didn't want them, or if he resented them, he could tell me to go screw myself. It wouldn't be the first time he had done so.

Schlifkin didn't come in that day but the day after. It was early in December, a real honey of a Chicago day, somewhere around zero with plenty of wind. Working out of doors in such weather couldn't have done Schlifkin's heart any good.

"So Shmuel," he said, his face still red from the wind, "whaddya got that's hot?" With his usual delicacy, he rifled through our stock, buying maybe eighty or so bucks' worth.

"Oh, by the way, Schlifkin, I brought from home a few things, a suit, an overcoat, a few shirts, my wife thought maybe you could use them. I've got more clothes at home than I know what to do with."

"Sure. Throw 'em in my bag. Shmuel, what's your best price on these bolo ties a dozen. I want your best price, Shmuel, no bullshit now."

That morning Schlifkin left wearing my Hickey-Freeman overcoat over his pea coat, his woolen cap pulled down over his ears.

In the months that followed it was an odd feeling seeing him in my clothes. He didn't own a belt, so he used a piece of rope through the loops of the trousers. He continued to wear his black gym shoes. He wore the shirts, which he must have washed out in the small sink in his room, but of course he didn't know from ironing. SSK, my monogram, remained over his pockets. Sometimes he would wear the suitcoat over a flannel shirt and a pair of grey washpants. The temple piece held on by electrician's tape had fallen off his glasses and he never bothered to replace it. Meanwhile, I let him go up another hundred bucks, and was now carrying him on the books for three hundred.

What did Schlifkin, who worked like a dog, do with his money? For one thing, I don't think he made very much. My nephew once went down to Maxwell Street to deliver a package of merchandise to him, and came back to report that Schlifkin was selling our stuff at criminally low prices, marking things up only fifteen and twenty-five percent when his mark-up should have been more on the order of a hundred percent. Then there was the *schmear* he had to pay to get a decent location on the street. A good share of his customers probably stole from him. I used to plead with him to raise his prices, I used to argue that with such a low mark-up there was no way he could hope to make out, but there was no talking to him. Schlifkin loved the action.

"Shmuel," he'd say, after I'd read him one of these lectures about getting a decent mark-up, "Shmuel, I'm like you—I work on volume."

Schlifkin was all business, oblivious to clothes, to the way he lived, even to his heart trouble. He was also, unfortunately, oblivious to what went on around him, and I wasn't all that surprised when one day he walked in with a gash under his eye, his hand bandaged, and two of his upper front teeth chipped. I was surprised, when I came to think about it, that it hadn't happened before. While he was closing up on Maxwell Street, after dark, three young blacks robbed him and beat the hell out of him. They took his money and his merchandise, leaving him only his card table. For good measure, one of them stepped on his glasses. Without glasses, Schlifkin

looked like some sort of small burrowing animal, prey to every other animal, who didn't see well in the sunlight.

"The thing is, Shmuel, I haven't got a dime to give you on account. And I haven't got any stock. Those *mumsers* took everything. New glasses are going to cost me sixty-five bucks and Friday my rent is due."

"So what do you want from me, Schlifkin?" As if I didn't know.

"Look Shmuel, I'm into you now for nearly three hundred. Let me go to five. Shmuel, put me back in business. Give me a break."

"Schlifkin, maybe now's the time to go back to Cleveland."

"Screw Cleveland. I like it here."

"Schlifkin, if I put you on the books for another two hundred, I'm going to set out certain conditions."

"These are?"

"First, that you stop giving merchandise away. That you begin to get a decent mark-up. Second, that at the first chance you get a checking account, so that you're not carrying around every penny you own on you. Third, that you don't hang around Maxwell Street after dark, so that every animal down there has a shot at you. Can you live with these conditions?"

He agreed. What else could he do? Fifteen minutes later, when he was selecting new stock, we got in a terrific argument about boxes. He said he didn't see why he had to pay a nickel a box on each scatter pin set. I told him it was because I paid four cents a box myself and that when you threw in the shipping charges I wasn't making any profit on the boxes myself.

"No shit, Shmuel. You should get a bigger mark-up."

I nearly threw him out of the joint.

One day in the spring I took a cab down to Maxwell Street to check up on him. The street had changed a good deal since I had last been down there—what was it, maybe fifteen years ago. A new freeway had taken out a good chunk of it. A few of the old clothing stores were still in business, their salesmen trying to pull in customers off the street. There were two or three fortunetellers. An aged Negro was selling

used-car parts which he had lined up on the sidewalk. The smell of frying food, onions and Polish sausage most strongly, was in the air. Mostly colored and Spanish were on the street.

In the middle of it was Schlifkin and his card table with my stock displayed on it. He was waiting on three Mexican girls. I hovered over at the side. When he saw me, he said: "Shmuel, you! To what do I owe the honor?"

"I'm checking up on you Schlifkin. In a manner of speaking you're my partner, you know. Or at least I have an investment in you."

"Shmuel, you want a cup of coffee or a sandwich maybe?" He had a little colored kid working for him, a gopher, no more than eight or nine years old.

"A sandwich down here? Schlifkin, are you trying to kill me so you can get off my books?"

"Shmuel, let me finish up with these ladies, I'll be with you in a second."

"Schlifkin," I said, when the girls had left, "you are breaking my heart with these prices. These expansion bands, you're paying me fourteen-forty a dozen, at a buck and a half a piece you're not making out. You should be asking—and getting—at least two-fifty. The Elvis neckchains you're giving away at ninety-eight cents. The Zippo-type lighters everyone gets at least two bucks. You're letting them go at a buck and a quarter. Schlifkin, the prices you're charging are giving me ulcers."

At this point a hillbilly couple came up to the card table, four or five black high school girls were looking at I.D. bracelets, and what looked like an older Polish woman priced lighters. Schlifkin was in his element, busy, doing business. He was a happy man.

"Shmuel," he said, "I got to take care of these people. I'll be in on Thursday. Save the hot items for me, willya?"

Schlifkin was Schlifkin; Schlifkin would always be Schlifkin. I had about as much chance of changing him as a snowball in hell. Yet something made me want to protect him. From what? From himself, I guess. Fat chance! Still, you had to ask, What was the point of a Schlifkin, a man who broke his back working for nothing, a man who asked nothing but to be allowed to do a little business. It didn't seem like a lot to ask.

Not that for a minute that I wished to be one myself, but there were worse things in life to be than a Schlifkin. When you came right down to it, what did it matter that I carried him on my books, a permanent entry, Schlifkin, Louis—\$500.

“Shmuel, another five hundred and I can stock the place the way it should be stocked. I’ll pay you back two hundred a week. Five weeks and I’m off your books. It can’t miss.”

Schlifkin had found a vacant store on the rim of the Loop. They were willing to let him rent it for the Christmas rush at a \$100 a week, heat but not lights included. It already had fixtures, counters, and shelving. All it needed, according to Schlifkin, was stock.

“What do you think I’m running here, Schlifkin, a charitable foundation?”

“Shmuel, this time it’ll be different. I’ve got a woman working for me. She knows the business. I don’t have to sign no lease. I go in the week after Thanksgiving and I’m out after New Year’s. It’s a chance for me to make a small pile. It can’t miss.”

“At your prices, you can miss.”

“Shmuel, I’ll let you come in and price everything yourself. Shmuel, I need this. Give me a break, Shmuel.”

“Stop with the Shmuel, goddamnit, Schlifkin.”

“Every Friday I’ll come in here, I’ll give you two hundred. I’ll give you my note.”

“What’ll you write it on, toilet paper? Because that’s about what it’ll be worth.”

“Screw yourself, then. I’m talking to you one businessman to another. You want to be insulting. Fuck you.” He was wearing my overcoat. By now Good Will wouldn’t touch it with a ten-foot pole. One button was left of the original four. There was a rip at the breast pocket. He must have slept in it.

“Hold your horses, Schlifkin. I didn’t say I wasn’t going to work a deal with you. I’m not going in for a full five hundred, though. I’ll go four hundred. Again with conditions: I set all prices, I help you choose the stock, you pay cash for all additional stock while you’re in the store. Take it or leave it, Schlifkin.”

“Shmuel, you’re a mensch.”

“Call me Shmuel once more and the deal’s off.”

Whenever we sent merchandise over to Schlifkin’s shop I marked both the price he was paying for an item and the price he ought to get for it on the box. Sometimes Schlifkin came in to pick it up himself; a couple of times a rough-looking character, a drifter of the type you see around carnivals who was the brother of the woman Schlifkin had working for him, came to pick up merchandise. Like Schlifkin under our agree-upon arrangement, he paid on the spot. No money, no merchandise. Once, to check up on Schlifkin, I sent a spy, my nephew Sheldon, to see if he was actually getting the prices I told him he ought to get. Amazingly, according to Sheldon, he was.

“One other thing, Uncle, and this you’re not going to believe.”

“What aren’t I going to believe?”

“Crazie Louie has a girl friend.”

“You mean the woman who works for him?”

“Yep. A hillbilly. Her name’s Vera. She has a tattoo on her forearm. You ready for this, Uncle—she calls Crazy Louis ‘darling.’ ”

“That’s Schlifkin’s business. How’s the store look? They getting any traffic in there?”

When Schlifkin next came in he gave me the details himself. Not about his lady friend but about the store. After he had deducted his rent and the money he paid his help, he was clearing somewhere between four and five hundred dollars a day—and there were still two weeks to go until Christmas. The woman who worked for him, this Vera, made a bank deposit at the end of each day, or so Schlifkin said. Meanwhile, he was using two or three hundred dollars of my merchandise every day. He was also paying off his debt to me.

“I got a little gold mine there, Shmuel, a goddamn little gold mine,” Schlifkin said.

It didn’t take much figuring. After five or six weeks in the store Schlifkin could walk away with a nice piece of change—maybe twelve or fifteen grand. Schlifkin was flying. His happiness was so obvious you could almost touch it. He had even

taken fifteen minutes off to buy a pair of shoes—plain toed black Army surplus, they looked like. Some days he wore a necktie over one of my shirts. Schlifkin was becoming a respectable businessman.

Then, after New Year's, he didn't come in for a week, then two, then three weeks. I was still carrying him on my books for \$178. Where could he have gone? Maybe he had taken his little pile of dough and returned to Cleveland, where he could face his family, now that he had made a mild success. Maybe he had taken his lady friend down to Florida. Schlifkin didn't seem the vacationing type, but you never knew. I once heard a story about a man who ran a restaurant on Roosevelt Road who worked three-hundred-and-sixty-five days a year; once, just once, he took a weekend off to go to South Haven—and he never returned. He didn't know about this thing called leisure, and once he had a small taste of it, he was through with work. Could something similar have happened with Schlifkin? It seemed unlikely.

One afternoon I walked over to his room on Milwaukee Avenue, but the card with his name was no longer there; some poor soul named Mendoza lived in that rat's nest now. I called Schlifkin's sister, Mrs. Rabin, but she knew nothing of his whereabouts either. Eventually, I supposed, he would turn up. If he didn't, he did me out of a lousy \$178. Big deal. Still, I wondered where the hell he had flown to.

Then one day, about a week later, Schlifkin was on the phone.

"Schlifkin," I said, "where the hell are you?"

"I'm in a flop on Madison, Shmuel."

"What's going on, Schlifkin?"

"You're not going to believe this, Shmuel, but that broad took me for every penny I had."

"Vera?"

"Yeah, goddamn Vera. The day after New Year's I sent her over for a last bank deposit, and she withdrew everything from the account—everything. She took off with her brother, if that bastard really was her brother. I've looked all over the city for them, but they must be in Tennessee or Alabama or some goddamn red-neck place. I feel like a real schmuck, you

know what I mean? I'm out of gas, Shmuel. I'm through, finished, kaput!"

"Don't talk that way, Schlifkin. You'll come in, we'll talk about it, I'll put you on the books for another few hundred, you'll start up again."

"No, Shmuel, I've had it. It's over."

"Schlifkin," I said . . . but he had hung up.

I got in my car and drove up and down Madison Street looking for him among the bums, but no luck. I tried again the next day and the day after that. No luck. On the fourth day I received the telephone call from Officer Levine that Schlifkin's corpse, in my overcoat, had been dragged from an icy Lake Michigan.

The next day I called Schlifkin's sister. She flew in to Chicago to identify the body and had it flown back to Cleveland for burial in the family plot. I thought about flying in for the funeral, but decided against it. Dead was dead.

Last week our accountant came in to close out our books at the end of our fiscal year. Among other details, I learned that the \$178 Schlifkin owed was a write-off in the category of a bad debt. Schlifkin was finally off my books. For the first time I spoke to the accountant about retirement and what would be involved in turning the business over to my nephew. I must be feeling my age. I'm thinking seriously about getting out. I think maybe I've had enough.

JUDITH HEMSCHEMEYER

Wedding Night

The train was almost deserted,
so the wispy conductor decided
to tell us the story of his life.
“You kids just married?” Yes, we said.
“Hope you have better luck than I did.
After twenty years, my wife just split.
Took the car and left me the pickup
and my guts got shook to hamburger driving it.”

You nodded solemnly and squeezed my hand,
your guts still firm and eager
and bright my wedding band.

The Method

Stanislavsky, Vakhtangov, Pudovkin.
Slapped awake by your passion for movies,
for acting, and bundled into your sleigh
—straw, stars, the horse’s breath a cloud of steam—
I careered through the streets of your dream.
After love, we listened to all eight sides
of *Boris Godunov*. What courage it must take,
I said, to pour out your heart onstage.

You frowned, beetling your handsome brow;
you were in Strindberg’s *A Dream Play* now,
learning your role, a coal heaver in hell,
by studying the Bronx Zoo gorilla’s
slow-motion rage. After that, you had to quit.
There was a baby coming, a living to get.

It's Dead

"Dad," he said. "It's Dad."
But I heard "dead" and I was right.
He was calling to report that you were dead.
And my first thought—I can tell it to you—
was that I was ruined.

For how could I write about your death?
And how could I write about anything else?

O churl! Remember our Shakespeare course?
How we laughed at the slaughter
in *Titus Andronicus*. We were so young.
Now we're frozen onstage in a play of our own:
you being beaten to death, I looking on.

To the Victor

"I want you both," you whispered on the phone.
Dazzled, emboldened, ignoring the word both,
I swaggered across the continent
to claim you for my own, found you morose,
evasive. We could never be alone,
unless—then you thought of the wooden horse.

"Make her fall in love with you too," you said.
Yes. Then hypnotized she'd seize the rope
attached to this strange gift and pull it through
the gate and I'd leap out and slaughter her
unless she saw me first. "I want you both . . ." Dead?
It's dark inside these sweating walls of fir.

Chinese Baby

Chinese baby screamed all night.
Chinese baby skinned alive
it sounded like.

Two is company, three's a crowd.
White flesh my food, white sheet my shroud,
summoned here but not allowed,

I'm jammed between the wall and thee
I dare not touch lest she should see.

Wind from the airshaft fussing
with the windchimes in the hall,

swelling beast between my legs
not fussy at all.

Versailles

The upper floors of the palace are honeycombed
with boudoirs just large enough to hold the bed,
the vanity of a woman once desired,
taken as mistress for awhile, then cast aside.
Forbidden and by then too proud to go home
—they had known le Roi Soleil—banished from his sight,
all night, all day they prowled the rustling corridors
the rest of their lives, perfecting their French, their spite.
I'm telling you this so you will understand why I,
listening to you dismiss me, could only stare
at your hands winding, unwinding a yellow cord
you'd found somewhere, why I couldn't raise my head
for one last astonished look into that
shimmering blue hall of mirrors, your wretched eyes.

JAY GROVER-ROGOFF

The Invention of English

Standing on the stones we are struck—not dumb:
I ask for an adze and am handed a hammer.
Tongues stick in the throats of men.
The work wastes. We throw it over.
What folly fastened? I forget.
The air in my ear is only wind:
I suspect it sings, but it is silent as I am.

ic eom

I am at the air's mercy,
and if the trees talk, twined in wind,
I'll listen. O let love fall
and strike me with sense as now
on the stones it stripped me. My house

hus

my house halts me, lame. I cannot
enter, acknowledge as my own a house
where I am the infant among my children.
I step, trepid. My ineptitude frights me.
I step again; my son steps toward me.
I slack my jaw and shut it; he smiles
and says, can say, nothing. My son

bearn

my son, speech struck from his throat
by the fact his father fixes on him.
He has lost his hold of words,
and I embrace him, braying *bearn*,

bearn, bearn, obeying a strange will.
 I turn; and try to disentangle eyes
 from hers that hold mine, hushed: my wife

wif

the woman who's waited and wasted
 while stone struck stone, ever higher.
 She speaks no syllable: her silence not
 of choice. Her cheek is wet. The children stare.
 She takes my hand and touches it to her hair.
 We need time to teach ourselves a tongue
 to live by and learn, to express this love.
 We must straiten our lives and start
 with the stutter and spit of speech,
 the impossible anchor of this English.

Dun Aengus

In the first century I would have broken
 my back to help build this ring fort to fight
 invaders from the West, the stones we snap
 dragging behind me and a dozen others,
 while you prayed I might return with my head
 uncrushed and my limbs young enough to clutch.

Two thousand years bring us here on bicycles.
 We read about Dun Aengus: guidebooks grant us
 foreignness. I drop to my belly, slither
 to the edge, stare down three hundred feet, where sea
 leaps upward, battering the cliff. I must
 back off, get gone, even were you not screaming,
 even were there something here for us,
 some plunder or possession we could grasp
 and look out to the West, the sea, and home.

Vanishing Point

Step outside the museum and the vanishing
point vanishes: no Turner promenades
your eye up alleys into a Venetian sunset;
there's no DeChirico plunging
you shrieking off high balustrades
to where lines reach their limit

and the painting ends. Behind canvas, nothing
but wall, fulfillment,
closure. Look down Fifth Avenue.
People in designer clothing,
buildings, the entire street heads for a point.
Walk. Run. The point recedes, like a movie.

See? No vanishing point, at all.
A point a mile above the steeple
of the Empire State,
a stately fireball
gathers a million people.
A vanishing point you must admit.

It flashes on your retina,
a bulb you see and see
until your nerve burns blind.
Light on a frame stuck in a projector
sizzles it. This too relieves your agony,
collapsing your skull to sow it in wind.

Another point, or points
indeterminate, crushing into the black
hole all for which anyone cares,
cities, museums, streets.
The snake
swallows its tail and disappears.

Go back: back up the museum steps. Find
that Turner. Run up its shining streets
to that sunset, bursting the sun's circumference,
approaching from the vanishing
point. There light emanates
to stare you down. Defy darkness.

MADISON SMARTT BELL

Monkey Park

for Carroll Murray Jones Lofty

At five o'clock in the afternoon the light comes in yellow across the brown curling paint at the edge of the window sill and makes the stained white walls of the kitchen glow golden, makes the tired enamel at the bottom of the sink look like old ivory. Carolee's just back from her job, she's a waitress in a lunch place this month, and she's in a pretty good mood. She finishes off the dishes from breakfast, and the hot water is pleasant over her hands, the last clot of suds moves toward the drain and Carolee flicks it away with a worn-out sponge that's shaped like an apple. She watches the afternoon light on the wall and it makes her feel warm and electric, like she wants something to happen.

Then something does happen. Carolee hears this awful noise, like a cross between a chain saw and a jackhammer, it's getting closer and closer and finally it comes around the corner of the house and stops under the kitchen windows. Carolee looks out through the vines that are crawling along the window panes and sees that the noise belongs to a big old wreck of a car, long and grey with blood-red flecks on it, like an enormous sickly shark. The car coughs and groans and chokes and dies, and the driver gets out and bangs the door and it's Perry. Perry walks around the tail-fins of the car and starts up the cracked concrete walk to the back door, and Carolee can even hear his feet rustling over the tough little weeds that grow up between the cracks, which means that Perry is definitely here.

Oh hell, Carolee thinks, but she can't not be glad to see Perry, so she dries her hands on the dish towel and dabs at the water spots on her jeans. Then she flips her hair back away from her eyes and goes around to the back door to let Perry in.

"So what are you doing back in town," Carolee says.

"Shrimpers in Bayou le Battrie," Perry says.

"Oh," Carolee says. "But this isn't Bayou le Battrie, you know."

"I know," Perry says. "I quit."

"Well come in the kitchen and drink some beer," Carolee says. So they go in the kitchen and Carolee gets out a bottle of Strohs and pours it into two glasses. They sit down beside the table in there, which has an enamel top with black speckles in it, and they don't say anything. Carolee lights a Lucky Strike and pushes the pack over to Perry and they smoke and watch the smoke whirling and spinning across the wide shafts of orange light in the kitchen. After a few minutes or so Carolee gets up and takes another beer from the fridge and pours it into the two glasses. Then she stands there with her fingers touching the table.

There's a little green tattoo smudged on the back of Perry's dirty pale hand, though she can't quite tell what it is. It looks like it could be initials or something, but it seems that Perry has tried to get rid of it, so it really isn't readable at all. Well, Perry doesn't look like someone that ought to have a tattoo. He doesn't even look much like someone that ought to work on a shrimp boat. He's little and light and not very strong-looking, though he has a nice enough face and all that. He's got messy black hair and dark eyes and the sun never tans him or even burns him somehow, he just stays pale and grubby all the time. All of a sudden Carolee is afraid that Perry is going to say, "Aren't you glad to see me?" so she wills him not to say this, and he doesn't.

Instead Perry gets down on the floor and lies on his side, with his knees drawn up to his belt buckle and his hands cocked in front of him like the paws of a begging dog.

"I have now metamorphosed into a shrimp," Perry announces. "I've looked into too many nets. I've seen too many little grey squiggles. I'm done for. I am a shrimp. I have a pointy nose and little feelers and no bones. I eat tiny garbage all over the big wide sea."

"Oh God," says Carolee. "Shut up and get off the floor."

Perry gets up and wiggles his fingers in front of his face.

"I will now clasp you in my shrimplly embrace," he says. He

makes a dive at Carolee but she dodges out of the way, and Perry turns around in the corner of the kitchen and puts his hands back in his pockets. That's when Carolee notices the green bruise healing around his left eye-socket. It almost looks like make-up, only there's a line of an old cut there too, and Carolee wonders if he really did quit the boat or if somebody just pitched him headfirst onto the docks one day.

"Well, I do smell like a shrimp, anyway," Perry says. "You can admit that."

"You smell like a lot of shrimp," Carolee says. Then she stalks over to Perry and gives him a quick hard hug, pushes him away and goes back to the windows, but the light is fading now, so she turns back around and half sits on the sill. Perry has enough sense not to be grinning.

"I have money," Perry says. "I have shrimp in the car. Shrimp for supper. Eh?"

"Alright," Carolee says then. "Go upstairs and take a shower."

"Maybe I should bring the shrimp in," Perry says.

"I'll get the shrimp," Carolee says. "Go on and get in the shower. I'll bring you up a towel in a minute."

There's a window in the bathroom tucked up under the eaves and Perry can look out over the tarpapered kitchen roof and see Carolee going out to the car, walking with quick reedy movements. Perry watches her peering into the ruined interior, finding the cooler and swinging it up over her narrow chest. She steps out from the car and closes the door with a brisk backward kick. The cooler is heavy, Perry knows, but Carolee stands there for a minute holding it, looking up at the window under the roof. Perry can't see her face too well at this distance, but he knows perfectly well what it looks like, freckles splayed over the urgent bird-like features, the sandy hair that keeps drifting over her eyes. Carolee shifts her glance and marches into the house, and Perry dunks his head back under the shower stream. He hears the back door slam closed behind Carolee, over the running water, and he lets water run in and out of his ears, thinking how her eyes look when they catch the sudden light beams in the kitchen, translucent, glowing, oceanic green.

Then Perry picks up a piece of soap from the tray in the shower and squeezes it until he's got enough lather to wash his hair with and when he's done that he rubs the soap lump all over himself, 'til all the fish slime is gone. Carolee cracks the bathroom door and hangs a red towel over the key that sits in the lock of it.

"Jesus, Perry," she says. "There's water all over the floor. There's a shower curtain on the shower, you know."

"I wanted to look out the window," says Perry. "I'll clean it all up when I get out."

"You better," Carolee says. Then she bangs the door shut, hard enough to rattle the key in the lock, but the towel keeps on hanging there.

Carolee even goes out and finds Perry's old duffle bag in the trunk of the car, so when Perry has finished his shower and dried up the floor he finds clean clothes waiting for him outside the bathroom. So Perry puts these clean clothes on and goes downstairs, rubbing his hair around with the dripping red towel. He goes into the kitchen where Carolee is. Perry's eyes are red and stinging from the soap that got in them and the evening air feels cool on his wrists and the back of his neck.

"Is Alphonse around?" Perry says.

"He's not in the house," says Carolee. "He's in town, alright, if that's what you mean."

"Oh," says Perry, and he drops the wet towel over the back of a chair. "I saw Art in Bayou le Battrie. He told me that Alphonse was thinking about a two-month job in Brazil."

"He decided not to take that job," Carolee says. "He's still working for Rock City." Alphonse is a solid blond cheerful man with a degree in Building and Construction. He inspects constructions while they are being built. That is his profession. Sunset is over and the light in the kitchen is now a sub-aqueous grey.

"I don't see how you can be married to someone named Alphonse," Perry says.

"You don't have to see it," Carolee says. "It isn't your problem." Perry lights another one of Carolee's Lucky's and

doesn't think of anything else to say. But cigarettes do taste good after showers. Carolee rolls up the dish towel and pops it toward Perry's limp collar.

"Besides, it's not his fault he's named Alphonse," she says. "His family is French from New Orleans."

"I don't believe that for a minute," Perry says. "I think his family is crazy is all." Carolee wraps the dish towel around her wrist and turns to look out the window.

"It's getting dark in here," she says.

"Alright," Perry says. "How do we do the shrimp?"

"Boil them?"

"Fry them?"

"Too much trouble."

"Do them in butter, no bread."

"Still have to clean them."

"I'll do it," Perry says. He goes out to the car and stands beside it, finishing the nub of the cigarette. The light snaps on at the kitchen windows, and Perry drops the butt and grinds it carefully into the dry red dirt. It's getting very dark now and the light is blue and up above the scrubby pine tops Perry can see the evening star. He reaches into the glove compartment through the open car window and gets out a red plastic shrimp peeler and carries it back to the house.

"Maybe you better not start yet," Carolee says. "Alphonse might be back to supper, only I don't know when."

"That's alright," Perry says, shrugging. "I'll just clean them now and put them in the fridge." Carolee goes to help him but Perry waves her away.

"Make sauce or something," he says. "There's only one peeler anyway." So Carolee sits at the table and watches him cleaning the shrimp with his deft bony hands, pushing the peeler from neck to tail, flicking the shells onto a newspaper and the shrimp into a bowl. Then the telephone rings in the living room and Carolee goes in there and picks it up. There's no light on in there and only a little dimness seeping in at the windows by now.

Carolee comes back in the kitchen.

"Alphonse is working late," she says. "Alphonse is having dinner with a business acquaintance. He wants us to meet him at the Wheel at ten."

"Fine," says Perry, slinging shrimp around. "I'm hungry right now, anyway."

"He wants to talk to you," Carolee says. "He's still on the phone." The peeler clicks into the sink and Perry walks out of the kitchen and picks up the telephone, which is sitting on one of those little round tables with a pole lamp sticking up through the middle. Perry puts the receiver to his ear and starts switching the light on and off. Carolee notices he forgot to wash his hands, so he's leaving shrimp goo all over the telephone and hanging sand veins on the pull chain of the lamp.

"Hey there good buddy," Alphonse says. "Good to hear you, good to hear you're back in town. Yeah, Carolee tells me you're back in town, so how're you doing, old buddy?"

"The same," Perry says. He pulls at the light chain. Alphonse's voice feels like it is right there in the room and slapping Perry on the back.

"Hey, sure, I know what you mean, hey. Nothing too much changes, does it? Naw, nothing too much changes. Hey, but I hope you'll be hanging around some this time, no trouble to us to put you up, got plenty of room and all. So hang around a few days, old buddy, maybe we'll take off and go fishing."

"Thanks, Alphonse," Perry says. "Thanks for the invite. I don't quite know how long I'll be around, though. I don't exactly know what's going to happen."

"Well that's fine, old buddy, that's just fine," Alphonse says. "I know just exactly what you mean. But anyway, I'll see you tonight, you're coming on up to the Wheel tonight, with Carolee, aren't you, right?"

"I'll be there," Perry says. "Take it easy, Alphonse. Until ten."

Perry hangs up the telephone and goes back to the kitchen, and Carolee goes in the living room and starts cleaning off the phone and the light stand. She cleans them very carefully so there won't be any fish smell and by the time she gets through the shrimp are already getting pink and rosy in the skillet that Perry has put them in, with onion and butter and a trace of garlic, and the shrimp smell very good indeed.

"We don't need any sauce anyway," Perry says. "These are just right how they are." So they both sit down at the table with salt and pepper and shrimp and beer, and Carolee feels good because eating something this good makes her feel purely happy. Then the shrimp have all been eaten and Carolee gets up and opens another bottle of beer. But Perry covers his glass with his hand.

"No more right now," he says. He looks up at the clock on the wall and it's still only seven.

"I got a little number out in the car," Perry says. "You want to do a little number, maybe? Carolee?"

So then they do the little number, standing out by the car in the vague starlight, and then they go in the house and drink a lot of water to ward off the cotton-mouth. They go in the living room and sit on the sofa and Carolee plays Billie Holiday and then Hank Williams, and then Billie Holiday again. The songs are pained and lonely, but Carolee feels fine and free and floating, and there is no light in the room except for the tip of one of Carolee's cigarettes that Perry is smoking, and Carolee's elbow is touching Perry's elbow, and Perry's knee is touching Carolee's knee, and Carolee jumps off the sofa and runs up the stairs to her bedroom. Then she comes back to the bannister and calls down the stairs.

"Come on up here, Perry," she says. "I got a real stage make-up kit now, I'll make you a face."

Then Perry climbs up to Carolee's bedroom and she makes him put out the cigarette, and she lights a candle and sets it up in a saucer on the floor. Then she puts the make-up box on the floor near the candle and works on Perry for a while with the things in the box, and she criticizes him whenever he twitches. Perry wants to look at himself when she's done, but Carolee says no. She scoots the candle over to the bottom of the full length mirror on the closet door and crouches there, working on her own face for a long time, while Perry sits in the corner feeling foolish and sticky. Then Carolee reaches behind her and takes Perry by the wrist and pulls him over so their faces are together over the candle and they're looking at themselves in the mirror.

Perry's face is simple and harsh, his skin is whiter than ever

now, and he's got black lips and black slashes over his eyes and that's all, it makes him look like a mime or a ghost. Carolee's face is more subtle and dangerous, she's lengthened her nose and raised her cheekbones and added some colors here and there. She looks as deathly as Perry does, also beautiful and fierce and disdainful.

"That's scary," Perry says, and he starts when he sees the lips of his mask moving. "You look scary, Carolee."

"Do you like it?" Carolee says.

"I don't know if I like it," Perry says. "Oh, you did a good job, alright." In the mirror Perry sees Carolee turn her head and look at him hard over the candle, so he has to turn and look at her too.

"Don't look like that," Perry says. Carolee keeps looking.

"It's ten already," Perry says.

So then they get up and go in the bathroom and Carolee finds some cold cream to take the faces off with, and they wash the faces off with this, standing side by side over the sink. When that's done they go down and outside to the car, and Perry arranges some of his clothes over the seat so that the springs won't stick into Carolee. Perry turns the key and nothing happens at all so he gets out and digs around under the hood and the car starts like a bomb going off. Perry presses a button on the steering column and the car begins to crawl backwards down the gravel drive to the street. Then he presses another button and the car begins to move forward. It still sounds like a bomb going off.

"Like the car?" Perry yells to Carolee. "It's got a push button transmission, the latest thing in cars."

"I guess so," Carolee says. "It makes a hell of a lot of noise."

"That's a special option on this car," Perry says. "It saves having to make conversation."

So they don't make any conversation until Perry has parked the car outside the Wheel, which is something like a cross between a nice little neighborhood bar and a roadhouse. It gets its name from a big old wooden wagon wheel that hangs over the door, and Alphonse is standing to the left of this wheel

when Perry and Carolee arrive. Alphonse has a seersucker jacket stretched across his big shoulders, with a lot of pens in the top pocket, and he keeps looking this way and that, until Carolee calls to him. Then he walks over to meet them, gives Carolee a peck on the cheek, and squeezes Perry's hand so hard that Perry makes a face. So they all go into the Wheel.

They sit down in a row at the bar and Perry buys everybody a mixed drink, only Carolee just takes a beer. Perry and Alphonse are sitting together and Alphonse tells Perry all his new jokes, and Carolee doesn't listen too closely to this, because Alphonse's new jokes are not new to Carolee. She looks around the Wheel and thinks that it's changed quite a bit since she was a teenager, when all there was to the Wheel was three-legged chairs on a sawdust floor with beer and pool and the odd knife fight. Now there's varnished pine panels all over the walls, and the chairs and barstools were designed by someone, and there's a big leather cushion along the edge of the bar, which keeps your elbows from getting sore. But the rednecks are still there with their girls and big cars, even if they do have on long hair and satin shirts now, and they still start fights all over the pool tables, even though they have nicer cues to bash each other with these days.

So Carolee sits there and thinks all these things, and she listens to the jukebox with one ear and hears Alphonse talking and Perry laughing with the other. Pretty soon Perry buys another round of drinks and Perry and Alphonse start to play an electronic game that they have in the Wheel now. The bartender brings a little box over to Perry and Alphonse, and Perry and Alphonse push buttons on this box, and all sorts of stuff begins to go on on a big lighted screen over the bar: a picture of a man with a gun shoots little lights at pictures of geese, and points are scored from this somehow. Alphonse beats the hell out of Perry at this game, because Perry has never been any good at games of this kind, and after Alphonse has beaten him a few times Perry asks Alphonse to go and shoot pool.

Alphonse beats Perry at pool too, but not so badly, and by now Alphonse is drunk enough to start telling his jokes all over again, and Perry keeps laughing at the jokes and buying more drinks. Perry is acting like everybody's rich uncle, he

keeps buying all the drinks and won't let Alphonse buy even one round, and Perry even keeps giving Carolee handfuls of quarters to go play the jukebox with. So Carolee plays things on the jukebox and she sits at the bar and drinks her beers, and Perry and Alphonse come stand beside her stool and talk to her between shots on the pool table. Everyone's having a wonderful time, and Carolee herself is feeling no pain, until Perry comes over and recites one of Alphonse's jokes to her, in such a way that the joke does not seem funny at all.

But Perry has to go make a shot right away, so Carolee doesn't have time to react because Alphonse comes over instead, and Carolee sees that Alphonse is now so drunk that he needs a big piece of the bar to hold himself up with, though he still seems to be winning the pool games. Then Carolee looks over at Perry and notices that he doesn't seem to be drunk at all, though he's been drinking as much as anybody and probably more. Well, Perry has always been like that, he drinks himself drunk and then he drinks himself sober again, only tonight there seems to be something deliberate and scientific about the way he is doing it, and Carolee might wonder what he is cooking, only it seems to be too much trouble, so she gets another beer and forgets about it. Then it's the last call, and then they turn up the house lights and unplug the jukebox and start sweeping the floor, and then the only people left in the Wheel are Perry and Alphonse and Carolee.

Perry looks dead sober under the bright lights that are on now, and he takes the cue from Alphonse, who is weaving just a tiny bit, and then Perry runs the table even though this game just started, and then he slams the cue back in the rack. Alphonse's eyes bug out a little at this, and Carolee herself feels suddenly sober, but that turns out not to be entirely true when she gets up onto her feet. Then they are all standing out on the curb, and the taillights of the last jacked-up car are drifting down the highway away from the Wheel, and Alphonse and Perry are on either side of Carolee with their arms linked through her elbows.

"Let's go do something," Perry says. "I feel like doing something."

"It's late," Carolee says. "There's no place open now."

"We can go to the monkey park," Perry says. "Let's go to the monkey park."

The monkey park is in Opelika, which is the next little town down the road, so they all get in the front of the big grey car, with Carolee in the middle. Alphonse has a brand new Volvo he'd be happy to drive, but Alphonse doesn't know the way and Perry wants to drive himself, so now Alphonse is shifting around on the ragged seat trying to find a spot with no springs sticking out.

"This is some car you got, old buddy," Alphonse says. "You going to customize it? Hey?"

"I like it how it is," Perry says. Then he starts the motor and it drowns out everything.

But when they get on the highway the car goes into some kind of cruising gear and shuts up considerably, and then even when Perry slows it down to go along the quiet little streets of Opelika it still doesn't seem to be making very much noise. Carolee looks out down the streets and thinks of the people asleep in the little white houses on either side, and the car floats along so softly that she doesn't really notice when it slips off the road and stops.

Then Perry gets out and clicks his door shut and Carolee and Alphonse get out on the other side and stretch their stiffening legs. The stars are out and fairly bright but it's still too dark to see faces. There's a little rise up from the roadside and when they get to the top of this they are looking down a long gentle slope, the edge of a deep basin full of trees. At the bottom of the basin, in a clearing there, is a thing that looks like a very big bird bath.

So Perry starts running down the slope toward the bird bath, and Carolee and Alphonse follow him down slowly, Alphonse stumbling just a little. When they get down there it is plain that the thing is not a bird bath at all, though Carolee knows this already, in any case. It's a green metal saucer that sits on a green metal post, and in between there is a ring of ball bearings, so that when Perry gives the saucer a little light push it starts spinning and keeps going for more than a minute.

"I love this thing," Perry says softly. "I think about it all the time when I'm on the boat."

Then Perry stops the coasting saucer with his hand and climbs into it. He sits there with his feet braced on the rim.

"Give me a push," he says, and Carolee takes hold of the rim of the saucer and runs around and around with it 'til she feels dizzy herself, and then she steps away from it, stands still and breathes hard. Perry freezes in the saucer and stares straight out, and Carolee and Alphonse are braided into the whirling trees so thoroughly that Perry can't pick them out at all, and Perry can't pick anything else out either because everything has blended and flattened itself into one continuous streaming ribbon of vision. Then Perry rolls over onto his back and closes his eyes and tucks up his legs like an embryo. He can feel all the liquor he drank shrinking away until it disappears altogether and only Perry is left there alone with a cold clear mind, solid and calm and perfectly stationary, while the whole rest of the world shrieks by all around him. When Perry opens his eyes again he is looking up into the waning moon that has just risen, and the white light burns a big circle at the top of Perry's sky, and Perry watches the circle until it fragments itself into twelve moons and then six moons and then only two or three, so Perry sits up again, and now he can see a few Alphonsees and Carolees flashing by. The saucer stops coasting and Perry gets out.

Then Carolee comes over and gets into the saucer. Perry runs with it until it's spinning fast and then he dodges out to the side. When he turns back around he can't see Carolee because she's lying down flat in the dish, and she stays down for a long time. When the saucer begins to slow down some Carolee sits up and moves toward the edge. Carolee's eyes are open wide and full of the light of the moon, but to Perry she looks like she's in a trance, so deep he thinks she may never come out of it. The dish holds its speed for quite a long time, and Perry begins to wonder if Carolee may not stay there forever, whirling and dreaming and rotating across his line of sight as evenly as his own pulse. But Carolee stretches her foot to the ground and stops it. She gets out of the dish and stands there beside it looking down at her feet.

"Well, Alphonse," Perry says.

"I don't know," Alphonse says.

"You're going to love it, old buddy," Perry says.

"Go on, Alphonse," Carolee says.

Alphonse climbs heavily into the saucer.

"What do I do?" he says.

"It doesn't much matter," Carolee says. "Just keep some of your weight on the center."

So Alphonse gets himself settled in, and Perry and Carolee push him together, until the saucer is going so fast that Carolee can't keep up with it. "That's enough," Carolee says, stepping away, but Perry doesn't hear her, or anyway he doesn't stop. The saucer is going so fast now that Carolee can't see Alphonse at all, and she wonders if he has been whirled away into nothingness, and after a while she can hardly see Perry any more either. But finally Perry breaks apart from the saucer and runs away from it in a long crooked line, stopping himself on a tree about halfway up the slope. Perry stands there and leans on the tree, while the saucer hisses and whirls on its bearings. It's a long time before the saucer seems to slow down at all, and Perry straightens up and stands near the tree as still and silent as if he were a tree himself. Then the breeze starts to blow the treetops together, and the branches sound almost like distant applause, and there is enough moonlight for Carolee and Perry to see each other's faces, across the top of the hurtling saucer.

Eventually the saucer does slow down and stop, and something begins to move around inside of it, and this something is Alphonse. Alphonse gets out and starts walking around, only he can't seem to find anybody, he can't even seem to bump into a tree. He wanders around in big sloppy circles, with his hands pressed over the top of his face. Then Perry goes over to him and takes him by the arm, whispers in his ear and leads him up the slope into the shadows. Carolee hears all sorts of strange noises coming from there, and she hears Perry's voice as steady and soothing as the night breeze, and after a while Perry comes back by himself.

"Alphonse is sleeping," Perry says, walking toward Carolee. "Alphonse is taking a nap for a while."

"Is he okay?" Carolee says.

"He's just fine," Perry says, still coming on. "He just felt like going to sleep for a while." Perry doesn't stop coming and Carolee can't think of any more questions, so she turns

around and starts walking the same way Perry is, walking rather quickly in order to keep ahead of Perry. Then it occurs to her that they are going toward the monkey cage, so then she has something to say.

"Let's go and look at the monkeys," Carolee says, and Perry doesn't say anything at all.

Then Carolee is standing in front of the monkey cage, which is no bigger than an elevator in an office building, and Carolee thinks that the monkeys would probably look pretty shabby in daylight, but by night they seem mysterious and alluring. There's five or six or seven of them, all about the size of five-year-old children, but they're slender and graceful and their movements around the cage seem polished and decorous. The monkeys have fan-shaped puffs of hair around their eyes, and they have long plumed tails. A couple of monkeys come to the front of the cage and gaze at Carolee with what seems to be wisdom and compassion, and a couple more climb up to the top and hang by their feet, to see what Carolee looks like upside down.

Then all the monkeys chitter together and turn their backs and the two at the top drop to the bottom and start combing and stroking each other's fur. Two monkeys come back to the front and reach out through the wires of the cage, and one monkey points a long black finger at Perry.

So then Carolee notices that Perry has caught up with her and in fact he's been there for quite some time, with one hand gripping her on the waist and the other one stroking her hair over and over. Carolee notices, now, but she doesn't do anything about it just yet, she just stands there stiffly with both hands holding on to the rail that someone has put up around the cage to keep her from being able to reach her fingers in where the monkeys could bite them. Perry nuzzles her neck and starts whispering into one of her ears, and Carolee doesn't listen to the things that he says, she listens to the monkeys clucking instead, but the monkeys are beginning to look very misty and far away.

"Just stop it," Carolee says. "You might as well just stop it."

"But why—"

"Stop it."

"But I—"

"Stop."

Then Perry stops and even moves a little away from Carolee, only dropping his hand over hers on the rail. The monkeys chitter and clutch at each other and climb up and down all over the cage.

"Where do you think they come from," Perry says.

"I think they've always been here," Carolee says.

"You think they like it in Opelika," Perry says.

"I don't think they care," Carolee says.

By the time the next silence is over Carolee can see chinks of daylight in the night sky. She looks at the monkeys and they do look worse in the strengthening daylight. The monkeys are all combing and stroking each other again.

"You know why they do that way," Carolee says. "They're just picking salt off of each other's skins."

"You didn't have to say that," Perry says.

"Yes I did," Carolee says. But she lets her hand turn itself over and take hold of Perry's.

"Alright, you did then," Perry says. "I have to drive down to New Orleans this morning, because Art says he'll get me a job on a rig." Carolee says nothing to that.

"I'll send you all some postcards," Perry says. "Probably I'll even be back sometime." Carolee doesn't say anything to that either, but she also doesn't let go of Perry's hand, so they just stand there and look into the monkey cage, and they don't say anything to each other at all until the sun tips its rim over the edge of the basin and they hear Alphonse calling to them through the trees.

RICHARD KENNEY

Up Chimney

Legs extended to the room
like Yule logs; arms crossed; bare head pillowed
on the cool swept stone, the hearth
in summertime . . . I do this, sometimes,
staring up the flue, stargazing
fool, my heavy draftplate flipped back
like a visor on the view—
eternity! Blue-black! Below—
an insect-crawl, a slow prickling
in the spot between the shoulder
blades—I almost feel Orion's
passage. China lies between us,
and eight thousand miles of ironware,
core and mantle . . . on the mantel-
piece, the moon is tipped up, balanced
like a broken plate. (Thus, chin
on chest, I see the room's reflection
in the window bay six feet
beneath my shoes. I see you sideways
at your sewing table, needle
in your teeth. Aldebaran,
a beauty-mark, has risen to
your cheek. And rest my head again,
to scry the open chimneypot
above, where The Bird's white eye, Altair,
stabs back; it drifts across its tiny
square of sky and tracks The Arrow
north and west across the frame
into the black coal-sacks at Cygnus,
blank spots in the Milky Way—
where I, too, blink back the spark,
grown fearful for an instant of
the pupils' unwilling spiralling,
their open merging with the dark—

BARBARA HOWES

Being Me

It is a jibing sense
 Of *being* what I feel
As the sail veers over . . .

Though it's a quartering wind
 Swerving, I recognize
I am right here.

Given a world view
 Of imps and pompoms dancing—
They're not within,

But looking up and out
 Of my own eye is like
Sharing creation!

Under a merle sky,
 Tacking from hurricane
To weathered calm,

A message from masthead
 Beams to intrinsic me—
I am alone.

Yet I, wayfarer, know
 My way, my port ahead,
My dock; oh.

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ROBERT S. CLARK

Music Chronicle: Searching for Signs of Life

NINETEEN EIGHTY-FIVE BEING THE TERCENTENARY of the births of Johann Sebastian Bach and George Frederick Handel, I have seized the pretext to indulge myself shamelessly. Putting both my parlor gear and my car cassette equipment to work, I am going through the Bach cantatas *seriatim*—alternating the “authentic” (boy sopranos, short-winded winds and parsimonious strings) with the extravagant sounds contemporary vocalists and instruments make. I am proceeding through the keyboard works, setting off harpsichord and organ with clavichord and piano. When the world and the flesh have got me down, I’ll take the consolation of a Passion or a Mass.

At the other extreme—music that is all robustness and animal spirits—I intend to listen to all of the recorded Handel operas, the tonic of their melodic force, their harmonic freshness and their dramatic ingenuity sure to banish whatever spiritual ills dog me. In between there will be interludes of the instrumental works—the wonderful Concerti Grossi, Op. 6, and the Organ Concerti—and the bracing choral odes and anthems. There will be abundant live performances within my reach, too. And when a surfeit of the Baroque threatens, I’ll recall that 1985 is also the centennial of the birth of Alban Berg. The Metropolitan Opera is presenting both *Wozzeck* and its three-act version of *Lulu*, and I’ll take whatever opportunity I can to hear the Lyric Suite, Chamber Concerto, Piano Sonata, Seven Early Songs and the doubly Viennese Violin Concerto, a capsule antithesis to the temperament of Handel.

Why bring all this up? It is symptomatic. The three books I have read for this review all confront the contemporary musical dilemma squarely: with the assistance of technology the audience for “serious” music—so called to distinguish it from the “vernacular” popular, jazz and rock—has available a vending machine whose offerings stretch from the earliest notated Western music through yesterday’s experimental creations (and non-Western music as well), and yet the levers being pulled are still most often labelled with names from the great tradition. To put it another way, and change the metaphor, the great wave that welled up with Bach, Handel and Haydn seems to have petered out with Mahler, Schoenberg, Stravinsky and Berg, leaving behind as it receded the likes of Boulez and Stockhausen. If the public taste that governs and underpins our central musical institutions is any index, there are no current successors to the masters of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and evi-

dence is still out on such recent contestants as Shostakovich, Prokofiev and Britten. Worse—and again if public taste, as reflected on concert programs and “good-music stations” across the land, attests correctly—the cultivated American listening audience would rather hear such great-tradition also-rans as Kuhlau, Stamitz, Albinoni and Marc-Antoine Charpentier than any American or European composer to flourish in the past twenty years.

Most observers make the assumption, either tacit or explicit (one of these is Samuel Lipman—see below), that “serious” music composition is at an end. John Rockwell doesn’t think so. Alone among Americans whose criticism and reporting gets wide exposure, *The New York Times* critic pays as much attention to jazz, rock, country and soul—the variants of American vernacular—and to such avant-garde manifestations as performance art, computer music and the so-called minimalism of Philip Glass and Steve Reich as he does to the standard classics. He calls his book *All American Music*¹ for the obvious reason, and his refreshing perspective throws down the gauntlet to those who mourn the passing of Western art music.

Rockwell fashions his portrait through twenty vignettes of living American composers: serialists Milton Babbitt and Ernst Krenek; knotty mandarins Elliott Carter and Ralph Shapey; John Cage, the father of American musical Dadaism and the newly fashionable performance art, in which music is only one among many means in a no-holds-barred assault on audience senses and sensibilities; post-Cageians Robert Ashley, Frederic Rzewski, Max Neuhaus and Walter Murch; “neo-Romantic” David Del Tredici, minimalist Philip Glass, performance artist Laurie Anderson and electronic artist David Behrman; the Art Ensemble of Chicago, Keith Jarrett and Ornette Coleman, all of whom derive their styles from jazz sources; Latin-rooted Eddie Palmieri, Broadway-rooted Stephen Sondheim, pop songwriter Neil Young and art-rockers the Talking Heads.

It might seem impossible to discern common threads running through such a patchwork. Rockwell’s unifying principle is an “individualized artistic self-awareness” that characterizes all of his subjects and is derived from the history of Western art music. “The vernacular musicians were chosen,” he says, “because . . . they have a self-consciousness as artists.” And beyond that, each of them has translated that self-consciousness into a distinctly American kind of independence and idiosyncrasy, whether lonely or notorious. Rockwell is interested, he claims, in “the composer who has refused to accept whatever it was that was expected of him.”

Perhaps taking a cue from what he sees as his subjects’ iconoclasm, Rockwell himself jostles a few idols. He does not shrink from calling Milton Babbitt, the doyen of East Coast serialists whose reputation is unassailable even among those who find his music unlistenable, to account for the “widespread belief among laymen

¹ ALL AMERICAN MUSIC: COMPOSITION IN THE LATE TWENTIETH CENTURY, by John Rockwell. Knopf. \$15.95.

that all new music is repellent pedantry." Of Elliott Carter, all but hallowed in American academic and advanced circles, he postulates a clash between "the grand elitist tradition of European art music, the ruder strength of the American character and his own sense of isolation," and hears a voice "curiously constrained, flawed by a lack of inner clarity and expressive directness." He spots a concealed hankering for success and applause in those who abjure them both philosophically and personally, and wonders aloud if some developments and directions his subjects are anxious to ascribe to their artistic aims were not in fact dictated, or at least nudged along, by commercial and careerist motives. He even has a good word to say about nationalism—the cultural spirit of place and people espoused by Johann Gottfried von Herder, and in its cruder cultural manifestations surely one of the most universally despised notions among today's Western intellectuals.

Rockwell opens by declaring that his training was as a cultural historian, "and I hope it shows." If he cannot persuade the reader that every one of his subjects is worth listening to, his advocacy of them as cultural signposts is almost always convincing. His book spreads itself out into a capsule history of American music, in fact, reaching as far back as William Billings and the seeds of American classical music, and to the beginnings of the vernacular in Anglo-Irish folk song, Stephen Foster, ragtime and early show composers such as Victor Herbert and Rudolf Friml. It is all both amusing and instructive to read.

Though he has been accused of excessive zeal on behalf of New York's "downtown avant-garde" of the past decade—the Kitchen school that has mixed rock, minimalism and performance art, among other ingredients, in a steamy and sometimes even tasty brew—it would be hard to detect that bias here in his treatment of those of his subjects, such as Glass, Anderson and Ashley, associated with this school or touched by it. The book is admirably free of predisposition, and this, along with his curiosity, his keen ear and his boundless appetite for the new, is among Rockwell's greatest strengths as an observer. Yet he is not without convictions about what he hears. He is alarmed by the tendency of many of our composers to equate complexity and excellence: "Composers can become obsessed with virtuosity, just as readily as performers," he asserts, and of minimalism he says:

Perhaps it represents something deeper [than what is just currently fashionable], a decisive swing away from the very fetishism of complexity which has defined modernist composition.

And it is characteristic of his moments of greatest enthusiasm that they are inspired by someone trying to make unity out of diversity. Of the downtown school he says,

The very nature of the most exciting musical innovations seemed

to involve fusions of heretofore distinct styles—rock and classical music, jazz and rock, music and video, performance and dance.

He is too honest, however, not to acknowledge that, though “fusion” has been touted as a balm for the ills of America’s increasingly diverse and fragmented musical scene (indeed, its artistic activity in general) ever since Gunther Schuller coined “the Third Stream” in the sixties, the medicine has not worked. “Stylistic fusions,” he concedes, “do not seem to work very well unless there is an element of unselfconsciousness about them.”

That would seem to doom the efforts of the subjects of his book, all of whom are contained therein precisely because they are conscious artists by his definition. But Rockwell does not despair. Assessing the career of Stephen Sondheim and its symbolic failure to restore the Broadway musical to its central place in our popular culture, he suggests that “the obvious source for the renewal of the traditional musical lies in rock. The two worlds, once so seemingly antithetical, have already begun to merge.” And it is no accident that the Talking Heads occupy the most prominent position in his book, guarding the exit from his guided tour: he sees in this group, whose sparkplugs Brian Eno and David Byrne draw on elements of art-rock, soul, African polyrhythms and more, “one of this country’s most creative combinations of artistic integrity and popular appeal.”

Is this more than whistling in the dark? In the absence, in modern America and Western society in general, of what Carter called an elite with “the power to give a single cultural style” to a society, can a unifying creativity emerge from such vernacular embers as Rockwell notes—one sufficiently strong to enchant the senses, nourish the mind, and win the allegiance of the masses as well as the man who loves Beethoven? No one has the answer. But my guess is that the forces that make American society a cauldron of pluralism, of ever greater fragmentation of thought, motive, purpose and will (did you watch the Democratic convention on television?), do not conduce to it, and will not in the lifetimes of those who read these words.

The other two books are more conventional, but one of them at least rewarding all the same. The less successful is Samuel Lipman’s *The House of Music*,² a compilation of essays the pianist-critic wrote for *Commentary* and *The New Criterion* between 1979 and 1983. Though he apologizes in a prologue for the “loose ends” that inevitably result in such a collection, a central theme runs throughout. Lipman deplores what he views as “musical power increasingly shifting from music makers to those who are either not musicians or who are not acting for solely musical purposes.”

It is hardly a new theme, notwithstanding Lipman’s apparent relish of what he calls “a lonely position”: I can think offhand of a half dozen or so musicians and musical commentators, from Eric Salz-

² THE HOUSE OF MUSIC: ART IN AN ERA OF INSTITUTIONS, by Samuel Lipman. David R. Godine. \$12.95p.

man, William Flanagan and B. H. Haggin in the sixties up to Donal Henahan and Bernard Jacobson more recently, who have sounded this warning note. Still, we can thank Lipman for his generous documentation.

In all he surveys, Lipman sees decline, decay, sham, opportunism, indulgence, frivolousness and folly. It's a depressing litany. The "new waves" of emigrés from Soviet Russia bring with them little of distinction and nothing to compare with the two preceding flights from oppression—from Bolshevik Russia and Nazi Germany—that graced this country and Western Europe with Stravinsky, Rachmaninoff, Heifetz, Schnabel, Lehmann, Hindemith and Bartók among others. Glenn Gould is alone among contemporary pianists in rendering the great works in fresh and challenging ways. In the songs of Hugo Wolf, Elisabeth Schwarzkopf and Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau represent a coarsening of taste on the part of both performer and the audiences who ardently received them, when stacked up against the artists of the famous Hugo Wolf Society issues of the thirties. The Berlin Philharmonic of Herbert von Karajan only fitfully attains the greatness it displayed abundantly under Wilhelm Furtwängler. Leading musical institutions such as the New York Philharmonic and the Metropolitan Opera are beset by "inadequate leadership, insufficient intellectual courage, and failing imagination." The National Endowment for the Arts (Lipman sits on its overseeing council) props up mediocrity, fosters egalitarian "self-expression" instead of art, and assists "vulgarization" of what was once "a civilized glory."

But after a time, as cavil piles upon cavil, Lipman becomes tiresome, and the reader finds his skepticism growing. Are things really so bad? Is the evidence being manipulated? I agree with much: great art, though its roots lie in the vernacular, springs from an elite consciousness and addresses an elite; the democratization of audiences has gone hand in hand with a compromise of performing standards and a dilution of idiomatic identification; music education has forsaken rigor for clever but ineffectual gimmicks, and so forth. But, reading Lipman, one comes to wonder if his finding so little to enjoy and admire is not symptomatic of a lack in the man as much as a failure of the times. He does show an occasional enthusiasm: Teresa Stratas as Jenny in Weill's *Mahagonny*, Horowitz, Glenn Gould's *Goldberg Variations* and an idiosyncratic Brahms D Minor Concerto with a reluctant Leonard Bernstein leading the New York Philharmonic, Karajan and the Berlin in one performance of the final movement of Mahler's Ninth. But most of the time he hastens to object—incidentally thereby enhancing his stature as keeper of the flame. Particularly after Rockwell's eager catholicity, Lipman can come off as a nag and a bore.

Some of his targets are cheap shots—Beverly Sills' regime at the New York City Opera, the Met's tawdry libretto series—and what he chooses to ignore sometimes looms large. When he asserts, for example, that Schwarzkopf and Fischer-Dieskau achieved their eminence by italicizing the songs of Wolf and others for unlettered au-

diences, he conveniently ignores a number of singers—among them Irmgard Seefried, Hans Hotter, Christa Ludwig, Gérard Souzay and Elly Ameling—who made notable international reputations singing Wolf's and other lieder without resort to what Lipman brands excessive mannerism.

We cannot all be John Rockwells, finding something to engage us in the most outrageous corners. For the discriminating, American musical life in the eighties may be attenuated, but there is still a lot more to be found than merely a saving remnant. Where, in Lipman's pages, are Alicia De Larrocha and Maurizio Pollini, pianists who would do honor to any age? Where are such estimable singers as Bernd Weikl, Lucia Popp and Jessye Norman? Where are such institutions as the American Composers Orchestra and the Minnesota Opera? Our time may not have—may be incapable of producing—the equivalents of Liszt at Weimar, Mahler at the Vienna Opera, and Toscanini at the helm of the NBC Symphony, or the likes of such individual artists as Caruso and Rachmaninoff who seem to embody cultural moments and tendencies whole. But there are some stars in our crown. Astigmatism of an advanced kind seems to afflict Lipman when it comes to the present.

Curiously, his view of contemporary American composition, as displayed in his fine essay "From Avant-Garde to Pop" (1979), has a lot in common with Rockwell's. He traces the unseating of the avant-garde represented by Boulez, Stockhausen, Babbitt and Cage by three new tendencies: "the aurally sensuous" (George Crumb), "the revolutionary-political" (Rzewski) and the "pop-hopeful" (Terry Riley, Steve Reich, Glass). But his wistful summation, worth quoting in full, sets him well apart from Rockwell:

No matter how much music in general will profit when shorn of the anger and bitterness of the avant-garde, the consequences of these new developments are hardly positive. While the avant-garde has indeed lost, no one has won. Wherever one looks, whether at Crumb's sensuous sounds, or at Rzewski's return to the writing of nineteenth century entertainments, or at Glass's employment of an idiom taught at the beginning of first-year harmony, one finds little on which serious musicians can grow. However attractive a return to simplicity may seem in moments of complex failure, recapture of a discarded innocence is as impossible in art as it is in life.

Unless a way can be found to use the past as foundation rather than shelter, the defeat of the avant-garde will have been in vain. And . . . it is difficult to escape the feeling that the wider culture will be impoverished by the loss of a leading edge. . . . In being deprived of a force against which it might define itself, conservatism has lost as much as our rejected modernism.

This is Lipman at his too infrequent best. Yet even here he fails to drive home the ultimate irony: though bloated by the recent box-office frenzy over *Glass*, the audience for all three offshoots of the old avant-garde disquietingly resembles that for the old avant-garde itself.

What is most troubling about Lipman is not his outlook, however, but his prose style. Even glum negativism is palatable if it is elegant and vivid. Lipman's is neither. His vocabulary for describing music and trends is limited and often lame, and his sentence structure is routine, resulting in a good bit of this kind of thing: "Wolf's repetitious, almost monotonous, chromaticism achieves an ineffable ecstasy by its very incessance." I can't suppress the schoolmarmish reaction that someone who sets so much store by high standards ought to demonstrate a rather higher one in his own craft. But, to Lipman's credit, this book is more readable by a fair margin than his earlier *Music After Modernism* (1979). An acknowledgment to the editor, William B. Goodman, who is said to have applied, "on occasion, necessary force," may locate the reason why.

Finally, one of the earliest and probably the best known of the apostates from total serialism, George Rochberg, provides us with a collection of dense, allusive, closely argued essays on a variety of musical and cultural matters.³ Because they stem from both before and after his change of heart, which took place somewhere between the late sixties and the early seventies, the contrasting views, particularly of serial procedures and of Arnold Schoenberg, are provocative. Though his editor, William Bolcom, a notable composer himself, implies that the "general reader" need bring little detailed knowledge of music and "the submovements of modernism" to these essays, it is difficult to conceive of anyone but professionals (and critics) finding much to detain them in Rochberg's discussion of time and space as musical concepts. But elsewhere the burden of these essays is nothing less than the fate of mankind. In the permeation of art by pseudoscientific notions of structure and order, Rochberg now sees a yawning chasm of ultimate soullessness and mechanization; he turned back, and these writings express what he learned by staring into the void. "The ear remains the best judge of music, however composed, but this intuitive perceiver of sound is not susceptible to outside numerical or verbal logic." "Culture, like time, its guardian, proceeds by slow accretion and eventually absorbs everything of value. By the same token, nothing of value is ever lost." Or destroyed: "The past cannot be erased." Taken one or two at a time, these essays reward the effort required in reading them: they show an elevated, agile, widely exploring mind at work.

³ THE AESTHETICS OF SURVIVAL: A COMPOSER'S VIEW OF TWENTIETH-CENTURY MUSIC, by *George Rochberg*. University of Michigan Press. \$18.00.

VERNON YOUNG

Of Mozart, Proust and Cambodia

THEY SHOULD NOT HAVE BEEN SO SMUG about our getting through 1984 unscathed. Reagan was reelected and *Amadeus* was brought to the screen.

Hudson Review readers who have seen *Amadeus* will not require elaborate explanations of why it is among the intolerable films of the year. I am willing, nay eager, to agree that there is no necessary connection between character and talent but no one can tell me that Mozart was the cackling imbecile he was in this movie represented as being by Tom Dulce, one of the worst new actors around. There is simply nothing to recommend this film except the music, *bien sûr*, which in fact we can hear any day on the American Public Network. The acting is uniformly unconvincing (F. Murray Abrahams plays Salieri as if he were Job, and like Job he is given too much to say), the editing might have been acceptable in a thriller where you can lean heavily on cutting for shock, the use of authentic setting (a palace in Prague) only proves how futile authenticity can be if you are at a loss how to incorporate it with your subject. Two chandeliers in a shot are insufficient if Forman can photograph ten. In a ballroom scene everybody—but everybody—is wearing a peruke and, what's more, he has washed it snowy-white that very afternoon!

I had not expected taste or style from Milos Forman. I did hope that Peter Shaffer, on script, would have exercised restraint because of his concern for his own play, which is somewhat better than this version, but no, he abetted the further vulgarization of his initially thin conception. For the peculiar popularity of this *schlock*, my guess is that there are considerable numbers of theater- and film-goers who are secretly relieved at being sanctioned to see the composer of *The Magic Flute* as just such an obscene playboy; it lessens the distance between his achievement and theirs.

That there are on the sidelines several critics as adverse towards *Swann in Love* as I towards *Amadeus*, I am fully aware. In my opinion, after you have sneered at Jeremy Irons's overnight French, deplored the simplifications of Proust's intra-social labyrinths and registered disapproval of that bleak "timeless" music of Hans-Werner Henze (whom Schlöndorff employed to distort his first period-film, *Young Törless*)—after this much justifiable complaint, there is, it seems to me, something to be said for what remains. I think it can be fairly said that Volker Schlöndorff was inspired by the Proustian insight, even though his execution often failed to embody it. What

do I mean by the Proustian insight? Above all, that gift for involving within a paragraph, a sentence, or even within a clause, the panoramic associations aroused by a single perception, frequently visual. When Swann, or the narrator, thinks of someone leaving on a train, he sees not only the destination, Combray, let's say, he sees also the man who left dismounting and walking through the streets; then imagines what, as he walks, he looks at and what he reflects upon.

No cinema director on earth could do justice to a minimum of such occasions unless he had at least 52 television episodes for any one of the seven Proust novels. But what a director *can* do is use the Proustian awareness for recreating a social confrontation, or a personal concealment, not necessarily the one in which he finds the clue. When, in the novel, the narrator mentions the Guermantes to Legrandin, he describes in a super-closeup what happens to the pupils of Legrandin's blue eyes, and the sequel.

His fringed eyelids darkened and drooped. His mouth which had been stiffened and seared with bitter lines, was the first to recover, and smiled, while his eyes still seemed full of pain, like the eyes of a handsome martyr whose body bristles with arrows. "No, I don't know them," he said.

Any actor would be gratified to have this as a parenthesis in his shooting script! I don't recall any moment quite so electrifying as this in Schlöndorff's film but there were other moments when a generic social attitude was strikingly reminiscent of a comparable judgment in Proust's fiction: this one, for example (which refers to the narrator's mother) is echoed in kind by Fanny Ardant's Duchess de Guermantes, à propos Odette.

To her, whether she admitted it or not, masters were masters, and servants were the people who fed in the kitchen. When she saw the driver of a motor car dining with me in the restaurant, she was not altogether pleased and said to me: "It seems to me you might have a more suitable friend than a mechanic," as she might have said, had it been a question of my marriage: "You might find somebody better than that."

Schlöndorff's decision to contain the events of his film in a single day, with flashbacks, was itself a Proustian method. So much of this is effective that one can only regret the lapse in taste that moved Schlöndorff to include that screwing scene with the prostitute (from whom Swann is trying to elicit information about Odette), during which he never removes the cigarette from his mouth! This is the Schlöndorff who beat our ears down with *The Tin Drum*. But many of his failures are honorable. He attempts valiantly, if unsuccessful-

ly, to match the ending of *Swann's Way*, before moving into the future, by interpolating a long-held shot of innumerable women rising to their feet to greet the eligible, philandering Swann, as if over a period of twenty years. I don't know why it doesn't really work; perhaps because it stands alone as a device the like of which he has not earlier invoked—it is out of sync. Following this we move abruptly into the terminal years of Swann and on the unlikely initiative of Baron Charlus we hear something like the equivalent of this famously haunting reflection.

The reality I had known no longer existed. It sufficed that Mme. Swann did not appear, in the same attire and at the same moment, for the whole avenue to be altered. The places that we have known belong now only to the little world of space on which we map them for our own convenience. None of them was ever more than a thin slice, held between the contiguous impressions that composed our life at that time; remembrance of a particular form is but regret for a particular moment; and houses, roads, avenues are as fugitive, alas, as the years.

Since we haven't followed the entangled relationships in which Swann and the Baron have been respectively involved, the pathos of their autumnal exchange does not, in the film, move us. As for Charlus himself, considering he is one of the most evil characters in all literature, he has become in Schlöndorff's assignment a shadow whom Alain Delon tries strenuously to animate without there being enough substance in the scenario for him to work from.

What *Amadeus* doesn't have for two minutes—the historical sense—Schlöndorff does manage to conjure. I haven't the faintest idea if anyone not having read a word of Proust would be moved to do so after seeing this movie. I should think he might be impressed by Schlöndorff's recapture from time to time of Paris before the deluge: the elegant cruelties of privilege, the creature comforts of a caste (getting out of a warm bed to go home in a coach as a pearly dawn comes up over that marvelous city); the rituals of the wardrobe (Swann having his hair trimmed as he eats a breakfast croissant); the impersonal pleasure of transactions with those, like your coachman, to whom you extend *noblesse oblige*; the indifference of fashionable friends to your expressed fear that you might die tomorrow. I would always be ready to see the film again if only to watch Jeremy Irons handle his walking-stick and deftly catch the scarf tossed to him as he hurries down the stairs—or Fanny Ardant kicking her trailing skirt as she turns to greet us.¹

¹ There are occasions—this is one—when, in all gratitude, the designers of sets and costumes should be named. They are, respectively, Jacques Saulnier and Yvonne Sasinot De Nesle.

An echo of the Proustian sense, without the worldly milieu, resounds in Bertrand Tavernier's perfect movie, *A Sunday in the Country*. I mean the sense of enveloping time in which the present hours are chiefly reminders of mortality, so that you hold on to them and to those who occupy them with you, even when those others say nothing you want to hear and understand nothing of what you say to them. Adapted by Tavernier and his wife from a novel by the late Pierre Bost, the film concerns an aging painter, a widower, living in the country not far from Paris (this is pre-World War I), who has established the custom of inviting, from the city, his philistine if personable son and daughter-in-law, with their three teen-age children, to spend Sunday with him. They fill his hours but not his heart. His better Sundays are those when his own daughter, Irene, who lives alone in Paris and resists all curiosity about her private life, can join them.

Everything that happens in the film—explicitly, nothing of consequence—has happened every Sunday. You are led to assume that the agreeable son never rises to such subjects as his father's praise of the great painters whom he admires (Cézanne, Renoir, Monet) but whom he feels he shouldn't imitate (hence remaining himself with no style to distinguish him); that the pious daughter-in-law always stops off on the way from the station to attend a second mass; that the eleven-year-old girl always gets train-sick and always climbs a tree from which she has to be rescued; that the boys always mock her and always throw rocks at the window; and that Irene, half trying to fill the place in her father's existence of the wife who died, is forever divided between her reciprocal affection for her father and the importunate claims of a lover in Paris whose existence, before now, the painter has refused to admit to himself. There is enough banked-down passion between father and daughter to blow the lid off the world but it is of course never acknowledged, and never will be, by more than a hand clasp.

Neither nostalgic nor satiric, the tone of this film is maddeningly difficult to convey accurately, because the whole affair is in that classical tradition of staying outside the characters represented while in some indefinable way evoking a kind of poetry from the invincibly prosaic. At long last, when everyone, having overstayed to oblige the painter's reluctance to be alone, has departed, the painter is left to face the only company, beside his dictatorial housekeeper, that he has remaining: his equivocal talent. He does *not*, as one critic perplexingly put it, return to the empty canvas of his life! Nothing so un-French. Spending no time in close-up sighs of anguish, he replaces the canvas on his easel with one of another size, dismantles the interior grouping he had been intending to paint and, turning his back on it, fixes his attention on the fading landscape outside. Whatever has taken place that Sunday we have not, in any dramatizable way, witnessed; it has taken place inside the man, surround-

ed as he has been by a love that barely knows it's there and endangered, and by the chattering presence of the unkillable petits bourgeois who serve him principally as an audience for his self-definition.

I see no way of effecting a transition from this world to that of *The Killing Fields* except by taking a giant step. The hype as before. This movie is great because it's real. It's real because it happened and is still happening and it comprises millions of victims. God knows, the massacres in Cambodia are among the many monumental tragedies of our genocidal century. And it's probably futile to ask moviegoers, coerced as they are by the television ethos, to distinguish between tragedy on earth and the experience of watching a movie which is ostensibly an art form with its own requirements. We had been informed, long before the film had its debut, that it was based on a *New York Times Magazine* article by the correspondent, Sydney Schanberg, who had been a frustrated eye-witness to the pre-history of the Khmer Rouge decimation of a people. Almost too good to be true, or to be a plausible film scenario, is the narrative of his friendship with Dith Pran, their separation by the shattering build-up of civil war, and the eventual happy ending, with Pran's incredible survival, and their reunion as staff members of *The New York Times*. We are told all this again (it's not enough to picture it) during the last interminable third of the movie, by which time we are all but numb to the "unendurable" events we have been exposed to for upward of two hours.

Before the film crumbles into one explanatory anticlimax after another, execrably edited, there's a central sequence of the Khmer Rouge slaughter which is probably the most authentic recreation of massacre in the violent history of the motion picture. Here the editing and the flash-point cutting is brilliant. Roland Joffé and his photographers bring into unsparing close-up the helicopters, the gun barrels, the tank tracks, the blindfolds, the shattered limbs, the extracted bullets, the screaming mothers, the fanatical eyes of even the juvenile oppressors, and everywhere the blood. Before and following these moments, the continuity might have been less of a drag if, to match the beautiful inward performance of Haing S. Ngor (as Pran), Schanberg had been played by someone (almost anyone!) other than Sam Waterston, a nonentity with a single expression which, no matter what else he's supposed to be feeling, is translatable as "Go ahead! Knock *The New York Times* off my shoulder!" I wonder if the part had ever been offered to Meryl Streep!

This is not in my opinion a film to be recommended on the puritan grounds that if it's true it is our duty to sit through it and pronounce it superlative. Except for the purpose of recalling the drift for this review, I had forgotten *The Killing Fields* in forty-eight hours.

JAY PARINI

The Importance of Stanley Cavell

ONE GOOD THING TO COME OUT OF THE RECENT INTEREST critics have taken in philosophy is simply the recognition that one discipline can benefit by commerce with another. The narrowly defined “professionalization” of criticism that seemed to accompany the hermetically sealed world of the New Criticism only continued the fracture and compartmentalization of the world that may well have begun with Descartes’ location of the subjective self in opposition to whatever is “out there,” thus setting up dichotomies unknown to previous times. Feeling a need to take criticism beyond close reading (where it necessarily functioned as a handmaiden to the primary text), a number of European critics (such as Georges Poulet) turned to philosophy, in particular to Phenomenology and Formalism, with their promise of an “open” universe and the enticements of “method,” something which criticism—as a nonscientific and hence “inferior” branch of knowledge—has desperately sought after without much success (as in Northrop Frye’s magnificent folly called *The Anatomy of Criticism*). American critics soon followed the Continental ones, of course, and they were right to think they needed to expand their horizons, though it has yet to be seen whether or not the Deconstructionists, with their often pretentious reinventions of the old Romantic wheel (via Rousseau, Nietzsche, Heidegger and Freud) will register more than a minor bleep on the final cardiogram of Modern Criticism.

The point remains that modern philosophy and criticism have suffered from the fact that each developed in isolation. The ancients would never have understood our modern obsession with “fields” of knowledge: Plato’s dialogues, for instance, are in every sense both philosophical and literary texts. The same may be said for Emerson’s essays or Thoreau’s *Walden*—perhaps the best, and certainly most American, instance of an imaginative text that answers fully to the philosophical tradition. We have all—writers, critics, and philosophers—needed to get beyond departmentalized knowledge, and this could only begin with an openness to forms of thought and expression that reach beyond the bounds of professional “expertise.” Herein lies the importance of Stanley Cavell.

Cavell began his intellectual career at Harvard as a philosopher in the Anglo-American mode, trained in the traditions of British skepticism, the various guises Positivism has adopted on both sides of the Atlantic, and the branching “schools” of analytical philosophy

(as practised by Russell, Wittgenstein, and J. L. Austin). Russell's marriage of logic and philosophy in effect offered a brilliant new method for analyzing the world by confronting the basic questions of naming, meaning, reference, identity, and so on, a method that Wittgenstein and Austin each transformed in his own way. Austin, in particular, promulgated a style of philosophizing known as "ordinary language analysis" that attempted, through the analysis of diction and syntax, to restore words to their "ordinary" or commonplace senses, on the assumption that language—philosophical language—had become increasingly removed, *abstracted* (in the root sense of that word: *ab-tractare*) from contextual meaning.

The problem with being a philosopher in our time, as Cavell gradually discovered, was that philosophy as an academic discipline, a "profession," had become a desert of specialists. The particular case against analytical philosophy is made by Richard Rorty in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, and it parallels in many ways the situation of criticism. As Cavell says, in this new collection of his essays, *Themes Out of School*¹: "When the professionalization of philosophy has most seemed to me a desert of thought (they make a desert and call it a clearing), the thought appears to me that the desert is—to some as yet, by me, unassessable degree—mine, or rather philosophy's, and I find it to have a value the world would be a greater desert if it lost." (The grammatically unstable form of that remark is, unfortunately, typical of Cavell in the prefatory comments affixed to each of the dozen essays in this collection, though the essays themselves are models of eloquence.)

Cavell responded to the dismal situation of his discipline by a refusal to "do philosophy" in the prescribed mode. He single-handedly decided to restore philosophy to criticism, taking his texts from a wide range of phenomena. The new essays are typical of his approach, defying the concept of "specialized studies" at every turn. The collection offers, for instance, a remarkably suggestive essay on "The Thought of Movies," another on television as a "fact" to be dealt with—intellectually and emotionally—by thinking people, another on "the politics of interpretation," one on Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*, which finds parallels between Coriolanus and Christ, another on Alfred Hitchcock's *North by Northwest*, which ranges far beyond the film itself into questions of psychology and pathology, and so forth. Cavell's range is dazzling by any standards, and threatening to philosophers, Shakespearean scholars, and film critics alike—indeed, to all who would insist upon "professional" compartmentalization. The charge that Cavell spreads himself too thin has been made, but it makes no sense. Cavell reads widely, he goes to movies, watches TV; in short, he *lives* in the world; that he feels compelled

¹ THEMES OUT OF SCHOOL: EFFECTS AND CAUSES, by Stanley Cavell. North Point Press. \$20.00.

to respond, in what Milton calls "answerable style," to this world is simply our good fortune.

Cavell writes as a philosopher first, though this doesn't mean that he writes only for philosophers. Like most of the great philosophers before "the professionalization of philosophy" set in, he addresses the ordinary intelligent reader. These recent essays continue his lifelong project, a project which he found to be essential to Thoreau in *Walden*: the virtual reintegration or grounding of "reason" in "experience." If indeed the source of our modern sense of dislocation *does* lie in the Cartesian separation of self and world, the problem was only intensified by Romanticism, with its relentless dialectic (a false dialectic, according to many feminists) of man (male) and nature (female), subject and object. Thoreau replaced the old philosophical questions about what we can know, how we can know it, and how it can all be verified—with questions about how to get one's living in the world or how to live beside one's neighbor.

Thoreau also dealt frankly with man's genuine need to philosophize, just as Kant did before him in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, which begins: "Human reason has this peculiar fate that in one species of its knowledge it is burdened by questions which, as prescribed by the very nature of reason itself, it is not able to ignore, but which, as transcending all its powers, it is also not able to answer." Analytical philosophers—after the early Wittgenstein—would like to dismiss all questions which cannot be "properly" asked. But Cavell, like the later Wittgenstein (about whom Cavell has written with marvelous clarity in *The Claim of Reason* [1979]), understands the human need to ask questions that probably can't be answered. Again like Wittgenstein, he realizes that a "successful" philosophy, one that deals adequately with a felt need, will be grounded in, and arise out of, experience itself. What follows from this is a concern for the concrete value of words themselves. In "The Politics of Interpretation"—one of the real gems in this new collection—Cavell says: "Wittgenstein speaks of philosophical procedures as bringing words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use—as if our words are *away*, not at home, and as if it takes the best efforts of philosophy to recognize when and where our words have strayed into metaphysics." His own efforts at philosophy (or should I say *writing*?), like Thoreau's or Emerson's, have also centered on the attempt to bring words "back" to their concrete, contextual sense without forgoing the fundamentally human need to ask certain questions that move into regions beyond the recognizable limits of cognition.

Cavell's reading of Thoreau—perhaps the best reading yet afforded that often misread writer—in *The Senses of Walden* (1972: recently reissued by North Point Press in an expanded edition)² is

² THE SENSES OF WALDEN, by Stanley Cavell. North Point Press, 1981. \$15.00; \$8.50.

central to his philosophy and underlies most of the essays in *Themes Out of School*. In that earlier work, Cavell argued that Kant was the presiding figure in the background for Thoreau. He writes: "I am convinced that Thoreau had the Kantian idea right, that the objects of our knowledge require a transcendental (or we may say, grammatical or phenomenological) preparation; that we know just what meets the *a priori* conditions of our knowing anything *überhaupt*." Unlike Kant, however (according to Cavell), Thoreau held that these *a priori* conditions or "forms of life"—a well-known phrase adapted from Wittgenstein—must be discovered experimentally, through immersion in day-to-day life.

Separating the noumenal world from the world of things, Kant posited a realm we could intuit but never really "know"—the realm, as it were, of the "unknowable." This realm was called the "thing-in-itself"—an awkward term for a slippery (and obviously paradoxical) concept; Cavell argues that *Walden* "provides a transcendental deduction of the category of the thing-in-itself," a visible rendering of an invisible (and indivisible) world. As one of Cavell's best critics, Stanley Bates, has said, "[Cavell] acknowledges the utter strangeness of using Kantian language to characterize this very un-Kantian project. . . . He aligns Thoreau with Wittgenstein and Heidegger here, by seeing all of them as rejecting the notion that our primary relation to the world is that of knower."³

As a philosopher who has stepped out of the narrow circle of academic philosophy, Cavell has made a crucial beginning in the project of uniting philosophy and literature; he has ventured into an area called by John Hollander (who admires Cavell), a "poetico-philosophical no-man's-land." This project, as Cavell notes in the eloquent "Reply to John Hollander" (collected in the new book), is indeed "essentially American." One has only to glance at the major Transcendental writers to realize that our literature boasts a fair number of major poetic texts that have a reasonable claim to being called philosophical. Cavell's work is at once a challenge to philosophy as it is practised in the academy, and to criticism, with its narrowness and, recently, its odd graftings of Continental thought. It was Emerson, Cavell points out, who took England (empiricism and skepticism) as the noon and Germany (Romanticism, with its adumbrations of existential and phenomenological thinking) as the night of the daily cycle of philosophical thought. Cavell is, in a sense, our Emerson, able to assimilate the best of both traditions. In one of the best essays in the new collection, "Existentialism and Analytical Philosophy," he searches out—and finds—the locus of commonality in these traditionally opposed camps through a brisk rereading of Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein. Cavell writes:

³ Stanley Bates, "Self and World in *Walden*," *The Thoreau Quarterly*, (Summer/Fall) 1982, p. 131.

Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard take seriously the fact that we begin our lives as children; what we need is to be shown a path, and helped to take steps; and as we grow, something is gained and something is lost. What helps at one stage does not help at another; what serves as an explanation at one stage is not serviceable—we could say, it is not intelligible—at another. In grown-up philosophy, the problems we have *remain* answerable only through growth, not through explanation or definitions.

Again, as in his book on Thoreau, Cavell's emphasis is on experience, a grounding in facts as facts are revealed moment to moment, in time. Ethics will thus necessarily become "situational." The philosopher's task, in Cavell's analysis, remains "to discover what we need." He must discover what our lives really depend on, and proceed from there, with intelligence and compassion. "Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard find the world suffering from illusions," writes Cavell, "and write to free us of them."

It is not too much to claim that Stanley Cavell does the same for us. He finds the world suffering from any number of illusions—about the effects of television on our sense of reality, about how to "think" about movies, and so on. His continuous project has been to strip away these illusions, to reorient us toward the sensible objects of the world. In "The Thought of Movies," he defines philosophy thus: "I understand it as a willingness to think not about something other than what ordinary human beings think about, but rather to learn to think undistractedly about things that ordinary human beings cannot help thinking about . . ." *Themes Out of School*, like Cavell's earlier books, cannot help but urge us to think, in fresh and undistracted ways about the world that actually confronts us. Cavell is an example of what Emerson called "Man Thinking"—the embodiment of unrestrained, informed intelligence—and his work has implications which should not be ignored by critics *or* by philosophers.

WILLIAM H. PRITCHARD

Fictive Voices

I HAVE NOT MET ANYONE who has actually—as we say—*read* Mario Vargas Llosa's 568-page novel (with many words on each page) but there is the general sense that it is Important, and, being the work of Peru's most important novelist, must be very important indeed.¹ Its appearance is another occasion for Americans to beat up on their own product, and in placing it on the list of the fifteen best books of 1984 the *New York Times Book Review* editors pointed out gravely that the list for American or English fiction was "not as strong" as the list of "obvious nominees from works by foreign authors." What no one has suggested, in the flock of reverent reviews the book has received, is how hard it is—or was for this reader—to flog oneself paragraph by paragraph over the well-navigated, purposeful (the vanity of millenarianism, of revolutionary simplicities) terrain. There is really not much fun in Vargas Llosa's prose, no doubt ably translated by Helen R. Lane:

Many *jagunços* had been blown to bits by shells from the Krupps, which began to bombard the mountain shortly after the first skirmish, causing landslides and showers of rock shards. Big João, who was posted alongside José Venâncio, realized that it was suicide to stay bunched together, and leaping from one rock slab to another, waving his arms like the sails of a windmill, shouted at them to disperse so as not to offer such a compact target. They obeyed him, jumping from rock to rock or crawling along on their bellies as below them, divided into combat groups led by lieutenants, sergeants, and corporals, the infantrymen climbed up O Cambaio amid a cloud of dust and a flurry of bugle calls. By the time Abbot João and Pajeú arrived with reinforcements . . . (etc).

We have now achieved p. 107, and there are 461 to go in this novel of action, full of obvious and heavily underlined *ironies* about politics, the vanity of human wishes, and all that sort of thing. Of course there are lots of characters with names like Counselor and the Little Blessed One and Father Joachim, there is a belching dwarf as well, and this may be your ideal way to get away from dis-

¹ THE WAR OF THE END OF THE WORLD, by Mario Vargas Llosa. Farrar, Straus & Giroux. \$18.95.

appointing Anglo-Anglican realism and satire, especially if you're curious to see how they order things in Peru (they order them *at length*, with an eye cocked toward García Márquez). As for claims that Vargas Llosa has written "modern tragedy on the grand scale" I find them as overinflated as I found this heavy, heavily knowing, oh-so-disillusioned attempt to turn a tall tale into something deeper which possesses (so a reviewer, Salman Rushdie claimed, plangently) "the slow, somber inevitability of a Greek tragedy." The sort of Greek tragedy I don't look forward to in a novel.

Which is not to deny that we have our own kind of North American over-inflation, and Joseph Heller shows up periodically to represent it and sell a lot of books, even if he failed to make the list of the international top fifteen.² Heller fell ill during the writing of *God's Gift* (struck down by his Maker who had heard enough?) but recovered so as to have his picture taken for the back cover in suitably informal togs, briefcase under the arm (I'm *always* writing), and a devil-may-care, sort of, smile on his face. Inside the book, there is everywhere that same scrappy, devil-may-care way with what those Jews used to take seriously. David is speaking:

Of the making of books there is no end and the longer I reflect on this tale of mine, the stronger grows my conviction that killing Goliath was just about the biggest goddamn mistake I ever made. Saul drafted me into his army that same day and I have been living under the sword almost all my life since. Fucking Bathsheba, then fucking her again, then again and again, and again, and holding her in my arms until I almost could not hold her longer, and could not bear separating from her—that could have been my second biggest mistake. Nathan really got on my ass about that one, and the next thing I knew there was a dead baby. Love is potent stuff, isn't it?

Ah but nothing like your prose, *bubella*, with its unforgettable mixture of kvetching and fucking. Imagine making David the lovable fellow he emerges as in the following lament, putting it like no young Jewish boy has ever quite put it before—"Like cunnilingus, tending sheep is dark and lonely work; but someone has to do it." As with Mario Vargas Llosa, there is plenty of time left (it's only p. 65 out of a long 353) and, compared to Vargas Llosa, whose ironies are known as "bleak," Joseph Heller's are always straight-out-simple—the kind you can really relate to:

We plucked without stop at each other's flesh, in stroking and punching caresses of the waist, hips, arms, backside, and thighs. Our fingers snatched touches. We kept touching tenderly when

² GOD KNOWS, by Joseph Heller. Knopf. \$16.95.

we weren't in violent embrace. We were constantly hot for each other.

"I get so wet," she sighed so often.

Cecil B. DeMille would have felt kinda humble and kinda excited if he could have procured film rights to Heller's technicolor delight.

No laughs in Robb Forman Dew's second novel, and not—as the *Times* termed Vargas Llosa's saga—a "powerful novel of adventure."³ Everything in her book takes place indoors, in ordinary middle-class houses in a place called Lunsbury, Missouri, where—except for once each summer when a mass of humid air settles over the town and things get muggy—

there was a pervasive sussuration of wind that rustled through the streets and down the alleys, across the golf courses and between the houses, moving the light objects—frisbees, aluminum lawn chairs, a scarf—from one place to another in any backyard where they had been left behind. An open door would soon slam shut. Papers on a desk near an open window would drift away and lie in trembling, shifting disarray across the floor. There was always something afoot, afloat, in motion.

The quoted bit from the novel's first paragraph may suggest how *written* a book it is—which fact should surprise no one who has read Miss Dew's first novel, *Dale Loves Sophia to Death* (read it, don't be put off by the title). *The Time of Her Life* is about a messed-up marriage, a separation, and its effect on the Parks's young daughter, Jane. The medium is throughout a cool, unflustered prose (as in the above sample) with a thoroughly poetic resonance. There is never a happening, an event, that asks to be taken any more seriously than the carefully-paced and arranged language which presents it.

The child makes off with a bottle of Percodan tablets, found in the medicine cabinet of her parents' friend, and from time to time, as the world becomes too much with her, she takes a couple of the pills. She also plays the violin, and the following moment is rendered in a prose seamless with that used to render more unexceptional events:

She wandered off after a while to her father's study, where she had set up her music stand, and she practiced for about a half an hour, but she had discovered that when she took any of the pills, the sound of the music she played was, to her own ear, muffled and distant, and she put her violin away and curled up in the Eames chair that faced the window and the long stretch of snow-covered meadow that rose up beyond her line of vision. Her

³ THE TIME OF HER LIFE, by Robb Forman Dew. William Morrow. \$12.95.

thoughts became muddled in a comforting and pleasant way, and she finally let herself go into sleep.

This painstakingly set-out passage has a disturbing power about it, as does, in a more exhilarating way, a moment when, at a school concert, Jane attempts to play the new violin her mother has prematurely presented her with. Just as the reader (this one) expects disaster to ensue, something else does:

As soon as she first drew the bow across the strings, she was aware that she had left herself and was speculatively observing her own playing. She was aware that no conscious part of her was controlling her own actions, that she was floating away from herself as she played the lovely, light, graceful violin and produced a sound of real brilliance. It was to be one of the rare moments in her life, as she stood there in the middle of the lightening room among the many little pinpoints of candlelight, when all lines of coincidence and fate and circumstance intersect and a small miracle of luck occurs.

Better than Percodan, indeed, and such seeming miracles of luck in Robb Forman Dew's prose are in fact the result of a steady, caring application to making sentences and paragraphs carefully expressive. *The Time of Her Life* is not a page turner, but rewards its listening reader with pages of patient and accurate representation.

In praising Robb Forman Dew's novel as "realistic," I mean to hold back from awarding that adjective to Richard Yates, who has been, recently, amply awarded with it ("America's finest realistic novelist," *Boston Globe*).⁴ He does not as the *Newsday* blurb says, belong up there on the shelf with Updike and Cheever, though he is an interesting, individual writer, whose *Revolutionary Road* (1961) is a still fresh novel about the pitfalls of suburban married life (Marvin Mudrick had the perspicacity to single it out for praise in the pages of this Review). Since then Yates has written a number of accomplished, if rather too neat stories, and published a scarifying novel (*Disturbing the Peace*) in which a drinker's progress is painfully detailed, from surliness to psychosis. His other novels are of a tone similar to the new one, and are "realistic" only in so far as Yates's people are always riding for a fall and his books describe the falls they suffer.

Young Hearts Crying, a tremulous enough title, is about the fortunes and misfortunes over the years—and time does march on in this novel—of a couple, the husband a writer, who undergo the excitements and depressions, unions and separations, of the typical Yatesian pair. There is, as always in Yates's work, much knowledge-

⁴ YOUNG HEARTS CRYING, by Richard Yates. Delacorte Press/Seymour Lawrence. \$16.95.

able and comfortingly applied detail of place and character, urban and suburban. The author does not make a point of playfulness, either in relation to his characters or his readers; in fact, there is rather a humorless air about it all, as the fully-knowing, ironic tone about the vanity of expectations casts its expected (for those readers of Yates's other novels) chill over the protagonists. You *know* they're going to screw up, and screw up again and again.

There is also, in the writing, a lack of rhythm, of *brio*, of the transformative powers of language, as in this paragraph of social observation:

The Nelsons' big living room was swarming with people, and so was the studio beyond it. There were a few lovely girls among the women, almost as if a movie director had organized the scene, and the men ranged from youth to hearty middle age, some of them with beards. There were three or four Negroes who looked like jazz musicians, and the crisp recorded sounds of Lester Young seemed to lace all the disparate talk and laughter of the room into wave on wave of pleasurable discourse. At first sight, and even on closer inspection, there was nobody there who didn't seem to be having a good time.

The writing is "effective" enough, but like most of Yates's narrative commentary doesn't do much beyond observe dutifully—Lester Young sounds "crisp" and there is "pleasurable discourse" and a "good time" in the room. "Realists" like Updike and Cheever are a good deal more poetic and daring in their narrative than is Yates.

Not to complain: there are fine patches—life in a creative writing course, or at a small-time theatrical enterprise—which nobody can do better than Yates. And there is also an attractively wistful and even sympathetic moment which eventually he allows his couple, having first put them through the wringer. Generally it's wrong to complain that a novelist wastes too much energy on lives which just aren't all that interesting. But I did feel the nudge of that complaint in reading this workmanlike account of human ordinariness, so little touched by the humor or the magic of things. Richard Yates is a skillful, devoted, and persistent teller of tales, whose "realism," even for a reader attuned by age and circumstance to his people and his places, doesn't quite suffice.

I had some good memories of short stories by Alice Adams, so wanted to like her most recent novel, an updating of *The Group* twenty years later.⁵ In fact it turns out not to be an update of Mary McCarthy, since it's simply not as interesting about the four college and postcollege lives, in detail, of four Radcliffe Little Women—Megan and Lavinia, Cathy and Peg. Nobody easier to read than Alice

⁵ SUPERIOR WOMEN, by Alice Adams. Knopf. \$16.95.

Adams, but she has adopted for this novel a very forcing, and to me annoying, narration of events in the continuous present:

During another cab ride, the final one, a couple of nightclubs later, Cameron begins to kiss her—but “kiss” does not quite describe that sudden plunge in her direction, that thrusting of a thick, bad-tasting tongue into her mouth, while his hands, strong and enormous, tear at her blouse. Peg is caught somewhere in that limbo between fighting him off and responding, both of which she knows that she is supposed to do simultaneously; she is supposed both to make him want to see her again and to convince him that she is not “fast,” or, worse, “easy to get.”

On goes the struggle until Radcliffe is reached just in time. This heavy underlining of Peg’s consciousness, which has nothing in it we didn’t know about already, is typical of the book’s rather annoyingly “objective” narrative manner (though really not at all—we are constantly invited to understand and in fact patronize these “superior women”). Entertaining enough in small doses, it palls over the 367-page stretch; one wishes Alice Adams would dole out a kick or a caress here and there, just to break the decorum. Really the trouble is that, unlike Updike and McCarthy (to whom William Abrahams has compared her) there’s no density to the writing—it puts up no resistance to a reader hungry for the facts, for a story. And at one point even the facts aren’t correct:

That winter, curiously, there was also a lot of talk about virginity in Megan’s Criticism of Poetry class. It came up particularly in discussions of Donne, and the sexual symbolism in the religious poetry: “I never shall be chaste, unless you ravish me.”

Readers of “Batter My Heart Three-Person’d God” will realize that Donne’s line has been garbled and ruined (“Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me”) by not Megan but Alice Adams I’m afraid. Superior women from Radcliffe (the author’s school) should never misquote.

It’s a hard life being a productive and successful novelist like, say, Paul Theroux, because some eagle eye will find you suddenly not fulfilling that promise you’d been fulfilling in the last five or six books.⁶ Over the past eight years, the writer in question has published three novels, *The Family Arsenal*, *Picture Palace*, and *The Mosquito Coast*, of which the first two seem to me undeniably first rate, and the third only a cut below. In the interstices, as it were, there have been the travel books: *The Great Railway Bazaar*, *The Old Patagonian Express*, and *The Kingdom by the Sea*. Add to that two volumes of short fiction. As an admirer of Theroux’s work ever since, by chance, I wrote about his first volume of stories, *Sinning With Annie*,

⁶ HALF MOON STREET, by Paul Theroux. Houghton Mifflin. \$14.95.

fifteen years ago in these pages, I'm not about to complain, even as I judge his most recent efforts in fiction and travel writing somewhat below his best. So the two novellas in *Half Moon Street* may be said to be less than top drawer, though the first of them, *Doctor Slaughter*, I read through with page-turning satisfaction. The doctor is female, a Ph.D. living in London and involved in some awful organization called the Hemisphere Institute, for which she does report work on the Arab World. In her spare time, she works for the Jasmine Agency (also deeply implicated in the Arab World) as a call girl, and the novella presents her sexual and economic rise and fall. But never in prose less lively than the following sample, as she is interviewed for the sex job by one Captain Twilley:

"You're a bright spark," he said. "But I'm less than ecstatic about your outfit." He spun one finger in a winding motion that he intended as criticism. "Have you got anything a little more colorful that would emphasize your figure?"

"If you think a social escort is just tits and a tight dress you have a very old-fashioned idea of what this job requires," Lauren said.

"What have you got that it requires?" he asked. She said, "I'm user-friendly." "Good," Captain Twilley said. "We get all kinds of punters."

Maybe it's just in reaction to the sobersides low-mimetic talk in Richard Yates and Alice Adams that makes me perk up to Theroux's idiom, but if so it confirms my sense that a certain kind of "realism" is not enough. The London underside of things is sharply, satirically rendered in *Doctor Slaughter* (the other tale, *Doctor DeMarr*, is Boston and less telling) and can remind us—with an eye ahead to the work this thoroughly entertaining writer will produce—of how resourcefully forthcoming Paul Theroux continues to be.

Speaking of resourcefulness and of being forthcoming, there is the phenomenon of A. N. Wilson, an English writer in, I should guess, his late thirties, literary editor of the *Spectator* for a stretch, who previous to this new novel, has published six others (two of them—*The Healing Art* and *Wise Virgin*—prizewinners in England) and in his spare time managed to write biographies (substantial ones) of Milton and Hilaire Belloc, with a book on Walter Scott thrown in for good measure.⁷ If, as it did with Anthony Burgess, Wilson's rate of production causes an eyebrow to be raised, let it be said that *Scandal* is a thoroughly engaging piece of writing, not only a good story (the progressive discomfiture of the protagonist, Derek Blore, a member of Parliament caught in a juicy sexual-political scandal) but handsomely turned out sentence by paragraph. As in

⁷ SCANDAL, by A.N. Wilson. Viking. \$15.95.

the following introduction of Henry Feathers, a seedy journalistic figure who turns out to be sleeping with Blore's exemplary wife, Priscilla:

Lank hair was swept back from a face which, over the last decade, had grown pinker and plumper, then redder and flabbier. Feathers was on the verge of going to seed. The silk bow ties which he invariably affected had started to fray and grow greasy. The sellotape which held his horn-rimmed spectacles in place looked as though it was to become a permanency . . . Now, as he made his way deliberately forward across the thick Turkey carpets of the Blores' drawing-room, it was fairly apparent that the previous two hours had been spent in El Vino's. But although the carefulness of his gait suggested a man who might be asked to give a urine specimen, and was trying to walk down the straight white line in the police station, there was a solemnity in it which half recalled a respectful courtier processing to an Investiture.

Densely and amusingly textured, the book eventually overreaches itself as its plot thickens perhaps a bit more than one cares to follow. I don't really see the point of comparing Wilson to Evelyn Waugh (to whom he has been compared); the styles are quite dissimilar, and there is not much eccentricity in Wilson's carefully worked-out novelistic presence. Much of this novel, in its nicely plotted development, its easy grasp of the London milieu, its agile moves from one character to another, resembles that of a first rate thriller—an honorable comparison which I don't think A. N. Wilson would reject.

One more London novel, this one by our veteran Anglophile, Alison Lurie.⁸ If *Foreign Affairs* has more generous feeling in it than her previous novels (it surely couldn't have less!) that is because of the presence of London, as registered strongly and convincingly (and lovingly) on the consciousness of her look-alike heroine Vinnie, unmarried, in her fifties, a professor of children's literature at Corinth (remind you of anyplace in upstate New York?) University. We must not, of course, confuse Vinnie's thoughts with those of her creator's, and so I reminded myself that the following fantasy, which I quite treasured in a kind of loony way, was *purely* a revelation of the heroine, not of Alison Lurie's inner life:

As she had done in early adolescence, Vinnie allowed herself to fix her romantic desires on men she hardly knew and seldom saw. These were not, as previously, film stars, but writers and critics whose works she had read . . . She had thus over the years enjoyed imaginary relationships with, among others, Daniel Aaron, M. H. Abrams, John Cheever, Robert Lowell, Arthur Mizener,

⁸ FOREIGN AFFAIRS, by Alison Lurie. Random House. \$15.95.

Walker Percy, Mark Schorer, Wallace Stegner, Peter Taylor, Lionel Trilling, Robert Penn Warren, and Richard Wilbur.

Why not Randall Jarrell, or maybe Delmore Schwartz, I wondered (perhaps they were among the "others"?), while cherishing this neatly alphabetized—for your convenience—list of lit stars.

As for the story of how Vinnie eventually warms up to a bumptious but sorta swell guy from Texas named Chuck, and how a Corinth colleague, also in London, has a tough time pursuing a Brit TV actress named Rosemary, it is but the merest trifle of an excuse for Lurie to make observations about love, or London, or aging. Some of these are fine, like this one about the English novel:

In the world of classic British fiction, the one Vinnie knows best, almost the entire population is under fifty, or even under forty—as was true of the real world when the novel was invented. The few older people—especially women—who are allowed into a story are usually cast as relatives; and Vinnie is no one's mother, daughter, or sister. People over fifty who aren't relatives are pushed into minor parts, character parts, and are usually portrayed as comic, pathetic, or disagreeable.

And so on, for some further good paragraphs. Compared to such intelligent observation, the more satirical parts of the novel seem to me uninteresting, with nothing new to report. Lurie has learned to talk dirtier than she used to (free employment, in a dedicated manner, of four-letter words), but sex is not any more fun to read about here than in her earlier novels: nor does the forcing, continuous present, as also employed by Alice Adams, add anything positive to the narrative. Lurie is a writer who maintains absolute control over her characters and her prose—there is never any struggle within the words to get something expressed. Efficient work, rather than work which touches one—at moments—from somewhere deeper than surface management. Which is to say, contra John Fowles on the back cover, that it is too clever and confident to "earn the same shelf as Henry James and Edith Wharton."

No time in this chronicle to deal with recent collections of stories, but three of them should be mentioned as highly attractive products.⁹ John Clayton's book adds another one of quality to the ongoing Illinois Short Fiction series, and Clayton writes well about post-sixties life, divorce, fatherhood, the furniture of dailiness. David Leavitt is only twenty-three years old, but the stories in his first collection feel as if he has been at it for years. The best one is the first, "Territory," in which a homosexual invites his lover to come visit him at his mother's house, and the liberal mother tries to deal with what she really can't deal with. And Frederick Busch, accomplished

⁹ *BODIES OF THE RICH*, by John Clayton. University of Illinois Press. \$11.95. *FAMILY DANCING*, by David Leavitt. Knopf. \$13.95. *TOO LATE AMERICAN BOYHOOD BLUES*, by Frederick Busch. David Godine. \$15.95.

and original as ever, gives us various looks at small town life, especially as it transpires in upstate New York (ever hung around Steuben Falls?). Each of these writers is unflashy, patient, inventive, and very much a pleasure to read.

After reading lots of contemporary fiction—like Alison Lurie's or Alice Adams'—which emanates from a strong satiric center, one yearns for a voice from the moon—to steal the title of Andre Dubus' fine new novel.¹⁰ In its slim 126 pages it is scarcely longer than Dubus' previous novellas (recently collected and brought out by David Godine under the title *We Don't Live Here Anymore*) and is different mainly for being centered on the consciousness of a young boy who aspires to the priesthood. Here is the opening paragraph:

It's divorce that did it, his father had said last night. Those were the first words Richie Stowe remembered when he woke in the summer morning, ten minutes before the six-forty-five that his clock-radio was set for; but the words did not come to him as in memory, as something spoken even in the past of one night, but like other words that so often, in his twelve years, had seemed to wait above his sleeping face so that when he first opened his eyes he would see them like a banner predicting his day: Today is the math test; Howie is going to get you after school. . . . It's divorce that did it, and he turned off the switch so the radio wouldn't start, and lay in the breeze of the oscillating fan, a lean suntanned boy in underpants, neither tall nor short, and felt the opening of wounds he had believed were healed, felt again the deep and helpless sorrow, and the anger too because he was twelve and too young for it and had done nothing to cause it.

Wyndham Lewis' *Taxi-Cab Driver's Test* for "Fiction" may be applied with success to this opening paragraph, since Dubus' writing immediately reveals itself as Art rather than "Fiction," a composed sequence with not only the right vocal idiom and the requisite detail, but with sensation heightened through poetry.

Why call it a voice from the moon then, since the narrative voice is an eminently calm one, concerned to present the tensions within a family: divorced father about to marry his older son's former wife; younger son deeply disturbed by it all, his own priestly aspirations threatened by the sexual charms of his contemporary, Melissa Donnelly (who likes to smoke cigarettes as she claims to be walking the family dog); an older daughter, presented economically but fully (as in the older son) in terms of age, class and place. The admirable filling-out of these things has been Dubus' trademark in his previous work: here it is evident in the setting of a town much like Haverhill, Mass.:

As he drove slowly on Main Street, the hands of the old clock

¹⁰ VOICE FROM THE MOON, by Andre Dubus. David Godine. \$12.95.

outside the clothing store joined at noon, and the whistle at the box factory blew. It blew at seven in the morning, at noon, at twelve-thirty and one, and at five in the afternoon; and sometimes he wondered, with sorrow and anger whose colliding left him finally weary and embittered . . . whether the timing of the whistle had once ordered every worker in town to factories, and to two shifts for lunch, and then to their homes.

This is a voice from the moon in American fiction because it contains not a hint of the knowing, satiric nudging of a reader into condescension and weary superiority. And Dubus is as even-minded with his characters—there are no villains, no heroes—as with his town. Although it may be impossible or at least undesirable to resurrect the phrase, you might even accuse him of something approaching reverence for life. At any rate he is a marvelous storyteller.

A quite different voice from the moon is Brad Leithauser's.¹¹ His first book of poems, *Hundreds of Fireflies*, was notable among other things for its clear-eyed, unsentimental, but also wholly generous responses to the things of this world. The poems were distinguished by their formal concerns (recently Leithauser published an essay, "Metrical Illiteracy," pointing out that most young poets wouldn't know what to do with "form" if they tried), so I was interested to observe that his first novel can't well be understood within any sense of form as a restriction or a tight-lipped compression of material. Expansiveness is rather the note, and is a hint to the novel's charm. Its jacket tells us that the author spent a few years as research fellow at the Kyoto Comparative Law Center, and the book is most certainly a novel about Japan, seen through the alert, quizzical and mainly eager eyes and ears of a young visiting American named Danny Ott. The fun of it, and there is much, may be suggested by a passage where Danny is told a story by his friend Greg about a "crazy American" who has smuggled five thousand pens (" 'Pens?' Danny asked delightedly") into Japan from Korea:

"But the great detail," Greg went on, "The really great detail, is how he tells me he'd have brought more but didn't know how he'd explain having any more than five thousand pens if he got caught." The phrase *great detail* was so frequently on Greg's lips that Danny jokingly had begun to refer to *Greg details*.

This leads to a list of Japanese "idiosyncrasies":

the young schoolboy wearing a regular watch on one wrist, a digital on the other: the porn magazine whose cover promised "How to Sex"; the man who, according to the *Mainichi Daily News*, was apprehended for jaywalking and, right there on the street, confessed to being a bankrobber—these were *great details*.

¹¹ EQUAL DISTANCE, by Brad Leithauser. Knopf. \$17.95.

But the great details about these young Americans, and the hero's visiting mother and father as well, are in no way treated as superior to or less open to affectionate satire than Japanese idiosyncrasies. The "message" of this book, which emerges during a visit by Danny to Hiroshima, is that such notions as international law, human rights, "theory" generally, mean nothing: "With nations, as with people, one was either dominating, dominated, or threatened with domination. It was clear there was only force on the one side, luck and cleverness on the other . . ." But one doesn't ponder that message for long. The grace of *Equal Distance* lies in Brad Leithauser's ability to keep equal distance from both sides, and to make out of what, in this novel, is a usually benign confrontation of nations and of people, a thoughtfully humorous story, voiced from the moon only in so far as it doesn't assign guilt, blame, or folly to one rather than another agent.

Our final voice from the moon is that of a comparatively new writer.¹² Susan Kenney's credits at the front of this book mention a previous "mystery" she has published, which I suppose could be a novel, more or less; and though the new book is composed of five not overlong chapters, with a minimum of narrative continuity among them, she calls it a novel. And I think she is right to have done so, even if the progression from one chapter (or rather "story") to the next is associative and allusive—is, in the best sense, metaphorical. A first-person narrative throughout, the "I" responds to all the thousand natural shocks flesh is heir to, from the sudden death of her father, victim of a heart attack, through the ensuing madness of her mother, to a husband on the brink of death from cancer, and finally ("The Death of the Dog and Other Rescues") a tragi-comic conclusion beginning with a quite horrific moment in which, inadvertently, the woman backs the wheels of her car over the family's beloved, aged dog.

It all sounds deathful, if not deadly, and so it is in a way, yet Susan Kenney's sense of life and her expression of that life in sentences and sequences, is both tough and funny, idiomatic and poetic enough so that she trusts her sentences to do the working for her, rather than laying the words into ready-made molds. There is the sense that this writer writes in order to discover something about herself, about life, and doesn't know in advance where each paragraph will take her, exactly. Consider a passage from "Facing Front," when with her children in tow she goes to stay with her mother and at one point asks the mother whether she wouldn't like to do something with her grandchildren:

"I don't do things with children, I just like to watch them," she answers imperturbably, and goes on knitting. I begin to feel more than annoyed. As a matter of fact, I'm getting quite angry, so I

¹² IN ANOTHER COUNTRY, by Susan Kenney. Viking. \$13.95.

turn and go upstairs, away from her, from the children bickering on the floor. How alien everything seems, how unreal—the way my mother lives. I walk through the upstairs alone and touch a crack in the plaster, and it comes away in my hand, a cobweb. Cobwebs heavy with dust festoon the corners of the rooms, the tops of the curtains, drape the lampshades. Last night I turned on the bedside lamp and smelled the dusty odor of dead flies smoldering in the heat of the light bulb. The surfaces are clean, the tops of tables and dressers, the rugs and parts of floors that show, but under the dresser scarves my grandmother embroidered the dust has sifted through the eyelets and made a stenciled pattern on the wood, and the underneath and corner places of the house are barricaded with dust. Nothing has changed.

Susan Kenney attended Cornell, there are sentences of praise on the jacket from James McConkey, and I detect similarities between these poetic realists especially in their command of a meditative prose. But Kenney has a quite engaging and irrepressible—just on the verge of pissed-off—humorous sense which often surfaces. Having taken the run-over dog to the vet's, it turns out that the beast will live, since in running over the pelvic arch the woman has done a fortunate thing—"there are no other contiguous eight inches of dog I could have run over without killing him outright." And so although the dog will have to be sedated and quiet for a few days until the bones are set—"you can't put a cast on a dog's ass, or anyone else's for that matter"—she decides that "things are clearly not as bad as we first thought."

The lovely thing about these stories, as they chronicle one disaster after another, is that somehow they manage to make us feel that indeed things are perhaps not as bad as we thought. This feeling has everything to do with the way Susan Kenney, through her style, discovers reality rather than pronounces on it or manipulates it. She is open and flexible, humorous it seems by accident rather than design, letting herself be carried into confidences and revelations which weren't there at the beginning of the venture. *In Another Country* earns the right to be treated as an instance of what William Empson was calling for at the end of his poem, "This Last Pain," when he invited us as readers to

Imagine, then, by miracle with me,
(Ambiguous gifts as what gods give must be)
What could not possibly be there,
And learn a style from a despair.

MARVIN MUDRICK

Tall Stories and Short Hairs

THE ILLUSTRATIONS MAKE THIS A COFFEE-TABLE BOOK in spite of itself.¹ Try ignoring the text: you could do worse (you could *read* it!); skip it then and just look at the pictures, of which there are a hundred and seventy-five, and great fun all of them. V. A. Kolve has assembled an extravagant time-travel gallery of English and Continental paintings more or less contemporaneous with Chaucer; clearly reproduced, though in black and white sad to say and so it's not as much of a coffee-table book as it might have been; ranging between the gorgeous fifteenth-century French sequence of plush, almost photorealistic depictions of scenes from Boccaccio's *Teseida* (source of *The Knight's Tale*) and at the other end of the line several teasers that in subject-matter and detail as well as technique look like very hasty restroom graffiti; all of them—especially in such mutually reinforcing profusion and proximity—energetic historical, cultural, anthropological testimonies to a long-lost time, even if they don't carry out their temporary assignment of helping Kolve prove with his text whatever it is he counts on proving.

Kolve begins with a disclaimer: "Although this book will bring together many images from literature and the visual arts, it is not my purpose to make stylistic comparisons between them. . . . As Ralph Cohen has reminded us, words are finally nothing like pigments; extension in time is not the same as extension in space; verbal and visual organization are not interchangeable. The 'sister arts' of poetry and painting are not, and cannot ever be, the same." Thank God for Ralph Cohen, light-bearer. "There is a thing, Harry," says Falstaff to Prince Hal, "which thou hast often heard of, and it is known to many in our land by the name of pitch: this pitch, as ancient writers do report, doth defile." Nonetheless Kolve isn't stymied by Cohen's Law, he moves on independently to attempt to prove at least an "affiliation," a bond of kinship and recognition, between Chaucer's "iconographic images" (Kolve's term) and the communally accepted—therefore authoritative and irresistible?—moralizing images of medieval paintings:

My focus throughout will be upon the imagery of narrative: not the passing metaphor or simile . . . but those larger images

¹ CHAUCER AND THE IMAGERY OF NARRATIVE, by V. A. Kolve. Stanford University Press. \$39.50.

created by the narrative action itself, which it invites us to imagine and hold in mind as we experience the poem, and which later serve as memorial centers around which we are able to reconstruct the story and think appropriately about its meaning. They are images that Chaucer moves his story to or through, and which he expected a significant part of his audience to recognize in their iconographic dimension—as images possessing public meanings independent of the narrative in which he uncovers them. It is that double identity that makes them central to the manner and meaning of his art. As I shall argue in Chapter II, they serve both to forward the fiction and to formulate, in a non-discursive way, its truth.

Whatever Kolve's "iconographic images" are—and either we already knew (and didn't care) or we'll never know (and who cares?)—Kolve's argument is the image of gracelessness and un-availing tautology. Lay a wreath of beaten-down blackboard erasers at the nearest memorial center, levitate to the iconographic dimension, centralize your manner, stultify your meaning, forward your fiction (don't be backward), and above all formulate your formulas. Smug as a slug in a rug. For instance according to Kolve the iconographic image of *The Reeve's Tale* is the horse, a big gross animal; horses in medieval paintings signify lechery (or passion); Chaucer does what medieval painters tell him to do; the tale is therefore about lechery (or passion?); spending the night in the same bedroom where the miller and his wife and daughter are snoring away, the wakeful and lecherous clerks "take note of the horse's tail that this deep sleep has left vulnerable—the tails of his wife and daughter" (no, that's not a nodding printer, it's a horse's ass, it's pure Kolve). In *Troilus and Criseyde*, at the moment when Troilus falls for Criseyde, Chaucer (as Kolve sees it, wrapping it up in his horse blanket) confirms Troilus's surrender to passion (or lechery) by inserting a stanza about a lecherous (or passionate) horse who learns all of a sudden his grubby place in the iconographic and medieval scheme of things:

As proude Bayard gynneth for to skippe
 Out of the weye, so pryketh hym his corn,
 Til he a lasshe have of the longe whippe;
 Than thynketh he, "Though I prounce al byforn
 First in the trays, ful fat and newe shorn,
 Yet am I but an hors, and horses lawe
 I moot endure, and with my feres drawe."

Troilus, in Kolve's formulation, "discovers the 'horse' within"; fallen man is unmitigated horse. But Kolve is wrong again, as Bayard could advise him (neigh, neigh), being after all not Kolve's horse

but Chaucer's, a heavy thinker who knowing his oats knows that Chaucer's radiant stanza is anti-iconographic and almost sacrilegiously unmedieval, that it says quite the opposite of what Kolve imagines it says; the high-mettled steed, "feeling his oats" and prancing off the straight and narrow like a free spirit, is in sooth more spiritual than the man; the lash of the long whip forces Bayard to acknowledge at the edge of the path, not that the flesh is weak but, in a flash of metaphysical insight, that free will is an illusion; what associates man and horse in Chaucer's comparison isn't their shared animal nature, isn't love or lust (only Troilus, goggle-eyed over Criseyde, is beastly enough for *that!*), it isn't need, it's necessity.

As for *The Miller's Tale*, Kolve proposes that the iconographic image is the horseless horse, too cute to be coarse or curbed; the colt (to which in fact the tale specifically compares Alisoun the sex-bomb heroine), paramount among various small fuzzy cuddlies which, by the authority of medieval paintings and Disney movies, have a ball frisking and frolicking with delicious impunity:

Through the power of imagery, we find ourselves disinclined to think of the actions of these young people as immoral (or even, in our modern sense, amoral). . . . Their actions become instead simply some things that young people do, which (as Helen Corsa has succinctly noted) no more invite stern moral judgment than do branches for putting forth blossom, calves and kids and colts for gamboling in meadows, birds for singing, lambs for wanting suck, or cats for playing with mice. In such a world, farting, pissing, and the kissing of nether beards lose their power to offend, and even fornication is transformed into music . . .

—which sounds like the English Department's annual nude picnic at Skin Beach: Ralph, meet Helen, she's as succinct as they come. Helen, you'll just love Ralph, he doesn't invite stern moral judgment. But no horsing around.

Of course Chaucer's juveniles enjoy a wider range of activities than Disney's: farting and pissing; the "arse kiss" and "bum-baring" (Kolve's terms: there's no indication that he's English; his book was published by an American university press, and he himself teaches at an American university, where ass-kissing is well known, also mooning; he doesn't explain these British airs; maybe Brit sounds classier, more literary, less frenetical, like Horace's *Ars Poetica*, to this horse's arse poetical). "Bum-baring" seems to have been all the rage in the Middle Ages, and "has its own humble area of provenance within medieval art," though it "seldom expresses so unambiguous an intent" as a scholar would wish:

What are we to say, for instance, about an ape who exposes his buttocks to another ape in the pages of a Tournai psalter, or

about an old man who bares his arse directly to the reader in the top margin of a page in the Gorleston Psalter? Figure 83, in which a man bares his buttocks to a kneeling nun, is only slightly less enigmatic. One may confidently label such a drawing “anticlerical”—as one does two other images from margins in which a mitred bishop and a Knight Templar kiss the arsēs of an ape and a tonsured cleric respectively—but one cannot say whether her gesture expresses adoration or abhorrence at what she sees.

In that “slightly less enigmatic” picture, the man is not only baring his ass to the nun but—as Kolve neglects to notice—shitting a shower of little turds; and, if Kolve thinks it’s fifty-fifty “whether her gesture [hands held out clasped] expresses adoration or abhorrence,” he ought to get to work on those turds and let us know how they resolve or obfuscate the iconographic problem. The medievalists are waiting, their Polaroids at the ready; though what are we to say about an ape who exposes his buttocks to other apes?

Incidentally, Kolve makes nothing at all in general of the abundance of such “anticlerical” art, let alone these examples of it. If for Christ’s sake you had to depend religiously on this book, you would think that all medieval European thought and art were Christian and orthodox (“For a mind like Chaucer’s—sophisticated, compassionate, Christian—the classical world, lacking any clear knowledge of the City of God, . . . must remain to the end a prison”); you would inform your helpless students (nobody but a professor would read such a book) that neither Chaucer nor any other medieval poet would ever have dreamed of writing a poem that wasn’t Christian and orthodox, whatever on the surface he might *seem* to be saying. This dotted notion made its *début* with D. W. Robertson, Jr. in his *Preface to Chaucer* (1963), a travesty of neo-Christian allegorizing which for example identifies Criseyde’s uncle Pandarus as the Devil himself and the Wife of Bath as a soul damned to hell and good riddance to bad rubbish. Kolve calls it “an epoch-making book,” and for a change he’s right, because it’s the book that nerved medievalists to upstage the laity by insisting that if a medieval poet says something Christian he means it and if he says anything else he means something more Christian still and if he says nothing at all he’s praying. Moreover any poem explicitly and tediously Christian is by definition masterly and preëminent: true, when Chaucer settles down to his proper job of propagandizing for the Faith he writes that stately bore of a Christian tall story *The Man of Law’s Tale*, which to come off at all needs the simple-minded saint’s-life matter-of-factness of its source in the Anglo-Norman fabulist Nicholas Trevet, and which doesn’t interest Chaucer enough to keep him from elevating it into tacky abstraction (a bit like Flaubert doing St. Julian); but Kolve knows better than both of us, knows that Chaucer on his black-tie behavior clears his throat and demon-

strates “what poetry can do at its fullest dignity, in the service not of fable but of Christian truth.”

Near the end of his life Chaucer entrusted himself publicly to the viselike clutches of Mother Church, he chickened out or saw the light and appended to the *Tales* a pathetic “retraction” of (among other works) “the book of Troilus . . . [and] the tales of Caunterbury, thilke that sownen [those that conduce] into synne.” For such as Robertson and Kolve he’s just reaffirming his lifelong Christian commitment, he isn’t (as he *seems* to be) straining to save his soul by disavowing profane masterpieces that he as well as everybody but a medievalist knows are explicitly and powerfully on the side of life on earth and its mortal pleasures: e.g. “revoking” *Troilus* because, though every epoch-making scholar has always known it’s Christian to the core, Chaucer himself knows that for over eight thousand lines it’s the strongest and steadiest celebration ever of fleshly passion, and that regretfully renouncing in the final hundred lines “this world, which passes soon, like lovely flowers” isn’t early or craven enough to get him past the Hanging Judge. “Allas! allas! that evere love was synne!” cries Chaucer’s soundest theologian the Wife of Bath in irreconcilable protest against the purse-mouthed Christian God.

“All his tales,” says Kolve, “are in an important sense [Kolve’s pet qualifiers are “in one sense” (“in one sense that is all there is to be said”) or “in another sense” which he never elucidates because in either sense he never has to make sense] Christian—certainly none of them sets up a countertruth, not even the tales that take place in pagan times.” Not even pagan Troy’s passionate *Troilus and Criseyde*, so the man says. Not even *The Miller’s Tale*, though the Christianity of its teller (not Chaucer; the *Miller*, you dummy; how can I talk to you if you’ve never even heard of a persona?) is dismissed by Kolve as “that of complacent superstition, imperfect in its forms, deficient in its understanding” (unlike the Christianity of pompous arses who can cite Hugh of St. Victor and Guillaume de Deguileville on the iconographic differences between shit and Shinola); no countertruth to the Gospel in this farting, pissing, bum-baring, arse-kissing tale (which reminds Helen Corsa of blossoming branches and sucking lambs) whose enchanting heroine cuckolds her husband, turns off one aspiring lover with a coltish trick, gratifies another lover and herself with dynamite fucking, and remains cherished, unchastened, pristine, and raring to resume *ad infinitum*. “The action of the tale,” says Kolve, “moves through two large narrative images of the kind that are my subject in this book, and which might properly be expected to address Christian truth: the one a ritual of religious adoration, the other a rehearsal of the preparations for Noah’s Flood. That they are not meant to bear such weight in this instance seems equally clear. Chaucer warns us in the prologue in his own voice that ‘gentillesse, / And eek moralitee and hoolynesse’ are not

to be looked for in this story.” But let’s distinguish with our customary inspissated opacity what Chaucer *says* from what as an abject Christian checking it out with the *Book of Vices and Virtues* or the *Speculum humanae salvationis* he really *means*: “between this expressed intent and the intrinsic tendency of his chosen material there is a radical disjunction that is not only central to the tale, but to the special challenge I think Chaucer set himself in its making: the witty and difficult business of writing about a second Flood without invoking, to any serious religious end, the meaning of the first. The means . . . moral and doctrinal significance . . . accrued . . . centuries of exegesis . . . genre, imagery, and mode of action . . . invention of a counter-art: nonhierarchic, nonhieratic, addressing no truth beyond itself.” Yet somehow down there among fair Alisoun’s curling cunt-hairs it’s all “in an important sense Christian.”

I come exegetically to the witty and not very difficult business of exhibiting the radical disjunction between Kolve and the English language. Writers who couldn’t make a point with a hypodermic needle are a safe bet to favor “precisely”: “But that is precisely their point”; “precisely for its exclusion of Christian material”; “he doubtless thought the role of art to be precisely . . .”; “An elegant manuscript illumination . . . may help us understand more precisely . . .”; “She becomes literature precisely because . . .”; “in precisely that posture”; “in precisely the same company”; “what is unloosed in the room . . . is precisely the forces [they *is*?] in man that the horse figure has traditionally symbolized in medieval art and thought.” Horse figures are prone to banana-peel solecisms, which sly old poetic justice induces them to flaunt and rashly skate out on: “the choice it offers between Christ *or* Satan, Christian *or* apostate, chaste mother *or* diabolic virago” (italics Kolve’s). English professors like to seem cool, man—“Time is awasting”; “the bottom line is . . .”; “a walk on the wild side”—though occasionally betraying their uncomprehending suspicion of a mere proverbial phrase: “birds of a *common* feather” (italics mine). Doubtless, the bottom line is in an important sense precisely; but Kolve’s prevailing idiom is septic-tank dissertational: “a myopic circumscription of the attention to clock time and local space”; “the auctorial consciousness behind the poem allows its characters a vigorous, robust existence”; “It needs, of course, no prior status in the medieval repertory of images.”

There are innumerable authorities besides Ralph and Helen and a host of the more or less honored dead, all of them supplying their imprimaturs for the outlandish, the false, the pointless, and the self-evident: “But Jill Mann is surely correct . . .”; P. N. Furbank “makes this point well”; Michael Murrin’s *Veil of Allegory* “is a brilliant book”—a wholesale distribution of compliments to colleagues tenured and untenured that Modern Language Association veterans refer to as “keeping one’s options open.” The community of scholars is always ready to turn a sympathetic ear to servile grati-

tude. Kolve prints a twenty-seven page appendix of Works Cited, which may well amount to eight hundred items (my calculation from a sample of one page)—not citations but separate *works*—for three hundred and seventy-one pages of text. There are a hundred and thirty-one pages of Notes (endnotes, not footnotes, appearing in a belated section off by themselves as is usual with a scholarly book so that it won't be necessary to read them).

My favorite passages, however, appear at the very beginning, in Kolve's "Acknowledgments." Servile or not, his gratitude for the "debts I have incurred" (mostly money; not debts but gifts, a cornucopia of cold cash and of the time that money can buy) is as multitudinous as the seas of flightless academics far above whom on wings of grantsmanship he sails toward realms of gold; and he has a lot to be grateful for:

I am grateful to Thomas Moser for much kindness as my chairman at Stanford, not least for a quarter's research leave that allowed me to begin looking at illuminated manuscripts at the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York. And I owe much to the friendship and good counsel of Fredson Bowers, under whose chairmanship I was invited to join the Department of English at Virginia [where, so the dustjacket notifies us, he is now Commonwealth Professor of English—an endowed position that puts him salary-wise and bottom-line among the Pete Roses and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar of the profession]. A concurrent three-year appointment to the university's Center for Advanced Studies gave me a reduced teaching load [because, as every professor knows, teaching is a waste of time and a drain on scholarly potency] and generous research support [cold cash] during the crucial first stages of this study. To the center and its director, W. Dexter Whitehead, I am deeply [or profoundly; not superficially] grateful. A Guggenheim Fellowship supported my first year of work with illuminated manuscripts in the great [none of the second-rate] libraries of Europe; the Danforth Foundation's Harbison Award for Distinction in Teaching [awarded no doubt during one of his leaves from teaching] informally underwrote another year of the same. A six-week residency at the Rockefeller Foundation's Villa Serbelloni on Lake Como provided me the most perfect period of concentrated writing I have ever experienced. . . .

Bliss. "The National Endowment for the Humanities has made a generous grant to aid the publication of this book." Who ever said the profession doesn't pay off?

MICHAEL GORRA

Cliffhanger

AS DOSTOEVSKY WROTE THAT HE COULD BE CONSIDERED a realist only “in a higher sense,” a chronicler of his characters’ souls and not their social surfaces, so Joseph Frank writes that this multi-volume study of him is “not a biography, or if so, only in a special sense.”¹ One cannot go to it for a minutely detailed account of Dostoevsky’s living arrangements, or finances, or sex life. Frank argues, in the first volume of this work-in-progress, that most literary biography tends to leave “art in the background . . . an adjunct to more fundamental life-experiences.” His work attempts to correct that imbalance by making “Dostoevsky the man an adjunct to his artistic concerns.” Frank’s emphasis seems to me relevant to literary biography as a genre. It is nevertheless grounded in his interpretation of Dostoevsky’s work, which scants the importance of the writer’s private, “quotidian experience” to consider it as:

. . . a brilliant artistic synthesis of the major issues of his time, a personal utterance to be sure, but one more than most, oriented by concerns outside himself. . . . For this reason . . . I dwell upon the social-cultural milieu . . . [from] which he derived the ideas and values through which he assimilated whatever life-experiences came his way . . .

For Frank, Dostoevsky’s power comes from his ability to “transform his personal history into the paradigmatic conflict from which his greatest work takes its departure—the conflict between Western ‘ideas’ and the Russian ‘heart.’”

That conflict’s roots, Frank shows, lie in the young Dostoevsky’s troubled relationship to the orthodoxies of the Russian intelligentsia in the 1840s. Two of those orthodoxies seem particularly important: first, a belief in Western Utopian socialism; second, in its literary counterpart, the “Natural School” of Russian fiction in which a character—usually a peasant—and his faults are seen as determined by the social system of which he is a victim. In his first volume, in fact, Frank treats Dostoevsky himself much as a writer of the Natural School does his characters. He describes his life almost entirely

¹ DOSTOEVSKY, by *Joseph Frank*. Princeton University Press. Vol. I: *The Seeds of Revolt, 1821–1849*, \$16.50. Vol. II: *The Years of Ordeal, 1849–1859*, \$25.00.

in terms of his cultural milieu, locating him in his times, through what seems to this non-Slavicist an extremely complex yet extraordinarily clear account of the personal and ideological tensions within that period's intelligentsia, creating the background for Dostoevsky's achievement, against which he himself does not yet stand out. Nevertheless, Dostoevsky's own life is in itself a great story, and one that in the terms of conventional biography Frank tells magnificently; nowhere greater, nor more magnificently told, than at the point in *The Years of Ordeal* when Dostoevsky's "private dilemmas" most touch "those raging in the society of which he was a part."

In 1849 Dostoevsky was arrested and put through a mock execution for his part in the Petrashevsky Circle's discussions on the liberation of the serfs. Here, Frank describes "The Incident in Semenovsky Square" in St. Petersburg, where Dostoevsky and his fellow-prisoners have been brought to hear their sentences, which they do not expect to be harsh ones:

. . . Suddenly the square resounded with the crisp metallic sound of soldiers snapping to attention, and the accused were ordered to remove their headgear while their sentences were being read. Most hesitated to obey the order in the biting cold, and the soldiers standing behind them were ordered to rip off their hats.

The sentence is read to the astounded prisoners, and the first of them put before the firing squad:

The suspense of waiting for the firing squad to pull the trigger lasted about a minute, and then the roll of the drums was heard beating retreat . . . [Dostoevsky's fellow-prisoner] Akhsharumov did not understand the meaning of the signal and thought it would coincide with a volley from the rifles; the ex-officer Dostoevsky knew immediately that his life had been spared. The next minute the firing squad had lowered their rifles and were no longer taking aim . . .

Biographical writing is often either a dull catalogue of facts or meretriciously novelistic. Frank's is neither. He has instead both a calm objectivity and the thriller-writer's—or Dostoevsky's own—grasp of the way circumstantial details heighten suspense, which extends even to the sudden passivity of the phrase "were no longer taking aim." An officer arrives, with a pardon and the prisoners' real sentences; in Dostoevsky's case four years at hard labor, with an indefinite Siberian exile to follow. The crowd leaves blessing the Tsar's theatrical mercy, and Dostoevsky is returned to prison, where he writes that "Never before have I felt welling up in me such abundant and healthy reserves of spiritual life as I do now."

Those reserves lie behind what Dostoevsky himself called "the re-

generation of [his] convictions." His great novels both testify to and depend upon that regeneration, yet he himself was never able to describe it. He suggests in the last paragraph of *Crime and Punishment* the possibility of a second novel describing Raskolnikov's "gradual regeneration," but did not write it. Nor did he ever write his planned multi-volume spiritual cliffhanger on the theme, *The Life of a Great Sinner. The Idiot* and *The Devils* are but preliminary studies for it; *The Brothers Karamazov*, an introductory volume. The mark of Frank's great achievement is that in *The Years of Ordeal* he provides a more complete description of that regeneration than does Dostoevsky himself.

In that description Frank skillfully uses the "quotidian experience" he shunned in his first volume, as if to mirror not just Dostoevsky's physical isolation from his cultural milieu but also his growing independence of it. Dostoevsky's first novel, *Poor Folk* (1846), had been a textbook example of the Natural School, and made him famous. By the time of his arrest, however, he had begun to chafe at its orthodoxies and began to shift "some of the onus for . . . human misery to the moral failures and weakness of individuals themselves . . . thus removing it from society." And he had already rejected the intelligentsia's belief in imposing Western solutions upon problems whose answers, he believed, lay in the "age-old historical organization of our people," in the Orthodox faith that the Utopian socialists denied. Dostoevsky had become a radical only because he hated serfdom more than he loved the Tsar. When in 1856 Alexander II began to abolish it, Dostoevsky began to live and write in opposition to the Westernized intelligentsia with whom he had grown up.

Prison helped destroy his old beliefs and confirm his new ones, and in doing so made Dostoevsky a great novelist. His fellow prisoners would go without necessities for months, to save money for one day of drunkenness that would flaunt their existence in the face of an all-powerful society; would act irrationally in order to preserve their spiritual liberty as he later made the Underground Man act. Their actions introduced him to the full complexity of human psychology and bore witness to what he had already begun to suspect in his fiction: "that the autonomy of the human personality could be a living reality." Men could murder and steal, or perform kind and generous acts, for reasons that the Natural School's scheme of social causation could not account for. Nor had the Natural School been right about the peasants. They weren't filled with the simple goodness Dostoevsky had been taught to expect, but were ignorant, violent, and cruel. Dostoevsky hated them, and they, because he was a nobleman, hated him in turn. The marvel of his prison years is that despite that hatred he nevertheless came to love and accept them, not with the intelligentsia's abstract love of a class, but with the precise love of every individual as an individual that so marks *The Brothers Karamazov*.

The key to this acceptance, Frank argues, lies in Dostoevsky's late essay "The Peasant Marey." There Dostoevsky describes his sudden realization, in prison, of the meaning of a certain moment in his childhood when one of his father's serfs had been unexpectedly kind to him:

. . . what deep and enlightened human feeling, what delicate, almost womanly tenderness, could fill the heart of a coarse, bestially ignorant Russian peasant, not yet expecting, nor even suspecting, that he might be free.

At that memory, he adds, "as if by a miracle, all hatred and rancor had vanished from my heart." Frank reads this essay through a knowledge of William James's account of the psychology of conversion, arguing that the combination of prison hardships and the onset of Dostoevsky's epilepsy in 1850 made him "receptive to a remodeling of his previous beliefs and values." It prepared him to make a leap of faith in the moral beauty of the Russian peasant—to some extent at least because his seizures were preceded, as Dostoevsky writes in *The Idiot*, by "a lofty calm, full of serene, harmonious joy and hope, full of knowledge and the ultimate causes of things": a moment, like that produced by his childhood memory, of religious exaltation.

Dostoevsky never fully sided with the intelligentsia's atheism, but his early fiction is nevertheless without the religious emphasis and power of his great novels. Only in prison did he accept the necessity of religious belief. Religion confirmed man's autonomy. It left him free to sin or seek salvation, and so afforded him a dignity that the Natural School's determinism denied; such is Christ's mute response to the Grand Inquisitor. Yet more importantly, religion made sense of the world, a sense Dostoevsky was driven to by prison's revelation of what it would be like to live without it. He writes that:

. . . if one wanted to crush . . . a man utterly . . . one need only give him work of an absolutely, completely useless and irrational character. . . . if he had to pour water from one vessel into another and back, over and over again . . . I believe the convict would hang himself in a few days . . . preferring rather to die than to endure such humiliation . . .

Frank uses this passage to gloss Dostoevsky's famous 1854 statement of his belief that:

. . . nothing is more beautiful, profound, sympathetic, reasonable, manly, and more perfect than Christ; and I tell myself with a jealous love not only that there is nothing but that there cannot be anything. Even more, if someone proved to me that Christ is out-

side the truth, and that *in reality*, the truth were outside Christ, then I should prefer to remain with Christ rather than with the truth.

Such a truth is for Dostoevsky senseless, robs the universe of order and condemns him to "pour water from one vessel into another and back, over and over again." And it was, of course, one to which he was always susceptible, and fought against with a love that was so jealous because it was so fearful. Dostoevsky had to believe in Christ because he wanted to live. He knew no middle ground between faith and despair, and so to him atheism implied suicide, as it does for Svidrigailov in *Crime and Punishment*, who shoots himself, Frank writes, rather than "endure the torment of living without hope."

The question remains, Frank says, whether or not Dostoevsky's "acceptance of the possibility that the truth might be outside Christ betray[s] an atheism he was not honest enough to acknowledge." But one need not—cannot—answer that question with a simple yes or no. Frank, rather, considers doubt as the precondition of faith, as creating the very possibility of faith. Dostoevsky's faith, he writes, is therefore like Kierkegaard's, who calls it a "'neverending worry about whether or not one has it.'" Yet that argument seems to sanitize Dostoevsky's spiritual troubles. Dostoevsky himself doubts too much to have the relatively settled option of considering that doubt as essential to his faith. Frank may, that is, describe Dostoevsky's condition but he does not capture Dostoevsky's own sense of his condition. For Dostoevsky is himself open to the seductiveness of Raskolnikov's belief in the right of the strong man to place himself above God's law; to the power, and yes, the generosity and pain, of Ivan Karamazov's attack upon God in the name of human welfare. In reading his novels one always feels that the power of cold reason over faith remain an issue for him as he writes, that at any moment Dostoevsky could choose to side once and for all with the "truth" that lies outside Christ. Yet as he affirmed his faith in the peasants despite their coarse bestial ignorance, so in each novel Dostoevsky fights through to an affirmation of God's existence, and hence of the world's sensibility, despite the injustices that test his faith; and the reader is in turn overwhelmed by the power and suspense of the novelist's struggle with himself.

For Dostoevsky's novels depend not upon the presence in them of Ivan Karamazov's "eternal questions" but upon the intensity with which his characters argue about those questions, in what Mikhail Bakhtin calls the "polyphonic" clash of idea against idea, character against character. Yet it took Dostoevsky twenty years to discover his own strength. His best-known stories up to and including *Notes from Underground* (1864), are solipsistic monologues. He shows a character alone with what Virginia Woolf describes as "the perplexed liquid, this cloudy, yeasty, precious stuff, the soul," worrying

about it, turning it over in his hands, this stuff, precious in more than one sense of the word. *Notes from Underground*, however stunning, is the most unlikeable masterpiece of its century, made claustrophobic not just by the narrator's self-absorption but by Dostoevsky's own. I suspect its fame rests on its provision of a catalogue of Dostoevskian "themes," all ready to present to freshmen. Dostoevsky bores, however "important" his material may be, whenever he concentrates upon a character in isolation. He writes well whenever he sets two or more characters against one another. The whole strength and point of *Crime and Punishment* is not that Raskolnikov kills an old pawnbroker and her sister and then lives with it for 500 pages, but that he has to live with it in a room filled with other people, all of them talking first about the murder and then about his own nervous collapse, and to whom he cannot talk in turn.

Crime and Punishment seems to me the most satisfying of Dostoevsky's major novels, perhaps because it is not a fragment of some larger work but an enlargement of an earlier plan. We know from Dostoevsky's notebooks that Raskolnikov, whose name comes from the Russian word for a religious dissident, was originally to have been a Russian version of Balzac's Eugène de Rastignac in *Père Goriot*: a young man tempted by murder to gain the money that will make him free, but who vows to live honorably thereafter. Halfway through the writing Dostoevsky himself became fascinated with the related but much larger idea of Napoleon, the man whose strength enables him to commit any crime without blame or guilt, and made that fascination a part of Raskolnikov's character as well. His murders become, then, an attempt to demonstrate that he too is one of the strong. Yet Raskolnikov makes no connection between his ideas and his actions. Dostoevsky only allows one to understand their connection in retrospect, through the prosecutor Porfiry Petrovich's summation, halfway through the novel, of an article Raskolnikov wrote on the subject before the novel begins, and which he himself has largely forgotten. For Raskolnikov's inhuman utilitarianism has its origin in the idea of theodicy, in his attempt to kill God with his pen by denying the power of His law—long before he picks up the axe with which he kills the pawnbroker. In doing the latter, he has forgotten God and so forgotten the real motives for his crimes; hence his inability to understand the nervous collapse that follows them. Porfiry Petrovich's questions force Raskolnikov to remember his theodicy, and the process through which he does so is the same process through which he comes to see the need of confession. And as Raskolnikov learns of his motives, learns that his story has begun *in media res*, so do we. We live with Raskolnikov minute by minute, our knowledge expands as his does, until our desire to know what happens to him becomes one with his anxiety and anguish; and the moral suspense of a great novel becomes one with the physical suspense of a great thriller. One often forgets, in concentrating upon

the "eternal questions," that Dostoevsky is above all a great storyteller. *Crime and Punishment* is the only novel of its length that I would read in one sitting if I could. Yet, paradoxically, the enjambment of motives from which its power comes grows largely out of Dostoevsky's confused working conditions. Throughout his career, he played physical necessity and artistic ambition off against one another, cutting corners, putting two pieces together to make one when he had neither the time nor the money to write both. Frank's only significant weakness is in the degree to which he ignores the materialistic side of Dostoevsky's creative life. Was he in debt when he wrote *White Nights*? What were the terms under which he published *The Double*, and was it written to a deadline? One wants to know, recognizing their importance to the later books, the degree to which such considerations affected his early work. I have no wish to know what the Petrashevsky Circle ate at one of their supposedly excellent dinners, but I would be interested to learn if Dostoevsky often attended in order to save the cost of buying dinner elsewhere.

Such cavils are, however, minor; my complaint is really that Frank has done his work so well that I wish he had written more. I look forward to his next volume. Dostoevsky wrote nothing during the years covered here that would guarantee his fame. When we leave him, newly returned to Petersburg after a decade of exile, he has just completed his training to be the Dostoevsky we read today. But the 700 pages of these two volumes, in which Frank describes that training, are not too long. This "realist in a higher sense" not only deserves such a substantial biography, but Frank's biography itself fully justifies its length.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

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JOSEPH EPSTEIN is Editor of *The American Scholar*.

MADISON SMARTT BELL* is the author of two novels, *The Washington Square Ensemble* and *Waiting for the End of the World*. He lives in Brooklyn.

"The Idea of a Town," written on November 2, 1983, was the last poem RICHMOND LATTIMORE wrote before his death in February 1984. His most recent volume of poetry, *Continuing Conclusions*, was published in 1983.

LOUIS SIMPSON's most recent books of poetry are *The Best Hours of the Night* and *People Live here*. He has a new book of literary criticism, *The Character of the Poet*, soon to be published by University of Michigan Press.

JUDITH HEMSCHMEYER has two books of poems, *I Remember the Room Was Filled With Light* and *Very Close and Very Slow*. Her translation, with Roberta Reeder, of the complete poems of Anna Akhmatova is scheduled to be published in 1986.

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(continued on page 176)

DEAN FLOWER

Nabokov's Personae

IN PHILIPPE HALSMAN'S PHOTOGRAPH HE TOWERS ABOVE US, butterfly net in hand. The monumental legs are thick as columns, and the remote face, half-shadowed, reveals a sneer of cold command. About to be enmeshed in that net, the viewer grovels at his feet. This Nabokov is available now on a postcard, alongside Bogart, Dietrich, and Chaplin—one of our mythic presences. Halsman also took the dustjacket photograph for all those McGraw-Hill editions in the 1970s: the brooding elderly writer, close-up, fixing us with an abysmally dolorous gaze. But you can find many other versions: family snapshots, publicity stills, grim passport photos, blurred glimpses from faded newspapers; Nabokov as a ghostly Pushkin, with sideburns, in the 1920s; "V. Sirin" at the Bunin celebration in Berlin, 1934; Nabokov at Wellesley in the early 1940s, looking unhealthily thin, a nervous smoker with pained hyperthyroid eyes; Nabokov telling a funny story in the 1960s, the light reflected in his spectacles making tears of laughter. Each photograph is a tantalizing mask, hiding more than it reveals; he seems indeed to have as many identities before the camera as he does in his fiction.

Every Nabokovian "self" encountered in his writing, whether it be memoir or interview, novel or letter, preface or lecture, is a fiction. While that may be true of many writers, it is peculiarly so in Nabokov's case, partly because he draws so heavily and directly upon his own history, but also because he demands that the reader look for him in his own productions (as Hitchcock did), and because he always ended these impersonations with a disappearing act. He loved to play roles, but was contained in none of them. "Across the dark sky of exile," he wrote of his pseudonymous self, "Sirin passed . . . like a meteor, and disappeared, leaving nothing much else behind him than a vague sense of uneasiness."

His best-known disguise, the one Philippe Halsman photographed, is the Nabokov of the interviews and prefaces: imperious, sardonic, dismissive, categorical, the ruler by divine right of his own private kingdom.¹ He can be mercilessly funny in this costume, if your own ideas are not being skewered. He defined this role, which came into being with his sudden fame in the early 1960s, as "the person I usually impersonate in Montreux." This Nabokov has a rather strict agenda: warn all Freudians off the property; deflate

¹ *Strong Opinions* (New York, McGraw-Hill, 1974) contains most of Nabokov's interviews in English.

the reputations of certain celebrated writers (Mann, Gorki, James, Cervantes, Stendhal, Faulkner); express loathing for all totalitarian states; instruct readers to appreciate idiosyncratic details; warn readers against the purveyors of cant, kitsch, and *idées reçues*. In the interviews this self is a master of the pre-emptive strike. Queried about his use of the double: "The *Doppelgänger* subject is a frightful bore." Do his characters ever take over and dictate the course of a story? "What a preposterous experience! Writers who have had it must be very minor or insane." Do you have any obsessions as a writer? "If I do . . . I'm careful not to reveal them."

After pages of such despotism Nabokov likes to add a few nice domestic touches. "I am a mild old gentleman who loathes cruelty," he will say, or "As a private person, I happen to be good-natured, straight-forward, plain-spoken . . ." Almost at once these self-renditions sound suspect. "The winters [in Montreux] can be pretty dismal, and my old borzoi has developed feuds with lots of local dogs . . ." But the point of these fictions is not so much that Nabokov must conceal his private life ("As a human specimen, I present no particular fascination," he assured an interviewer in 1969; "My habits are simple, my tastes banal") as that he expresses himself better by adopting a persona. "What I really like about the better kind of public colloquy," he once admitted, "is the opportunity it affords me to construct in the presence of my audience the semblance of what I hope is a plausible and not altogether displeasing personality." None of the "interviews" he allowed to be published ever took place as an interview. The eager journalist had to submit his questions in writing; he received his answers typed out; sometimes, but not invariably, he would meet the personage "interviewed," and receive strict orders about quoting verbatim, sending proof, and allowing the author final corrections. Thus Nabokov assured himself of a purely controlled identity, or as he put it, "Nowadays I take every precaution to ensure a dignified beat of the mandarin's fan." It is startling to notice how frequently an unwary reader—aggravated into hostility—has assumed this Nabokov is the real one.

Posthumous publication² has made accessible another, much more congenial and generous self: Nabokov the teacher, or better say the academic lecturer, who trod the boards at Wellesley for six years, at Cornell for ten, and at Harvard for one. In Berlin he had given lessons in French, English, tennis, boxing, and prosody; and in America he fell into the teaching role almost at once. "My lectures are a purring success," he wrote to Edmund Wilson in 1941. "Incidentally I have slaughtered Maxim Gorki, Mr. Hemingway—and a few others—corpses impossible to identify." What strikes the reader now, however, is the glow of imagination and moral passion in these performances. That he performed Gogol's death scene,

² *Lectures on Literature*, ed. Fredson Bowers (New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980); *Lectures on Russian Literature*, ed. Bowers (New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981); *Lectures on Don Quixote*, ed. Bowers, (New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983).

screaming as the leeches were applied; that he once darkened the lecture hall and suddenly ("This is Tolstoy!") flooded the room with light; that he used the blackboard to draw Kafka's dung-beetle, or a Russian woman's tennis costume c. 1875, or to diagram the overlapping identities of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, or the floor plan of Anna Karenin's sleeping coach, or the thematic structures of *Bleak House* (which formed the face of a cat)—such dramatic tactics were only a part of his "purring success."

Twice-exiled Nabokov did not presume that his young American students would recognize, unaided, that literature is one of the great havens of the creative intelligence. So he dared to teach them. He argued that all great novels are "fairy tales," in the sense that they invent their own justifications and deny the tyranny of other supposed "realities." He insisted that great literature be "useless" in the sense that it not be exploited for some cause or validated by some utilitarian purpose (the principles of "inutile loveliness" and "aesthetic bliss" in *Lolita* were first formulated here). He argued that to know the individual magic of each writer's art was everything, to generalize about the writer's history or society nothing. He asked his students, in what became a favorite formula, to learn "the precision of poetry and the intuition of science." What emerges most strongly, forty years after these lectures were written, is Nabokov's moral fervor. His concluding words on *Bleak House* are typically eloquent: "A great writer's world is indeed a magic democracy where even some minor character, even the most incidental character like the person who tosses the twopence, has the right to live and breed." His peroration on *Don Quixote*, a work which in some respects he loathed, is even more resonant:

Don Quixote is greater today than he was in Cervantes's womb. He has ridden for three hundred and fifty years through the jungles and tundras of human thought—and he has gained in vitality and stature. We do not laugh at him any longer. His blazon is pity, his banner is beauty. He stands for everything that is gentle, forlorn, pure, unselfish, and gallant. The parody has become a paragon.

Nabokov's lecture on "The Art of Literature and Commonsense," perhaps the most unabashedly didactic of them all, is a manifesto on the morality of art: "This capacity to wonder at trifles—no matter the imminent peril—these asides of the spirit, these footnotes in the volume of life are the highest forms of consciousness, and it is in this childishly speculative state of mind, so different from commonsense and its logic, that we know the world to be good."

There can be no doubt that lecturing stimulated Nabokov as a writer. One can hear in his metaphors the intense pleasure he took in shadowing a fellow craftsman. Everywhere we meet such phrases as "the continuous stumble through all Chekhov's stories," or the "dimpled style" of Jane Austen, or Gogol's narrative "jerk and

glide," or the way Tolstoy "peels the apple of a phrase," or Proust's "mauve color, the violet tint that runs through the whole book, the very color of time." Nabokov wanted his audience to experience what he called "the creative thrill" which readers and writers might share: something "apprehended all at once in a stellar explosion of the mind." Perhaps he liked the role of lecturer because it allowed him to be both reader and writer. He might have been describing his best moments in lecturing when he wrote, of the creative thrill, "It is a combined sensation of having the whole universe entering you and of yourself wholly dissolving in the universe around you. It is the prison wall of the ego suddenly crumbling away with the non-ego rushing in from the outside to save the prisoner—who is already dancing in the open." At such moments the speaker himself seems almost to have disappeared into the great fairy tales that his lecturing has reconstructed.

Never very far from the literary scholar in Nabokov is the lepidopterist, yet he seems to have wanted to keep that role separate. When interviewed he preferred to say, "My interest in butterflies is exclusively scientific," or writing and butterfly hunting "belong to quite different types of enjoyment," or "the aurelian's passion . . . stands outside the limits of a novelist's world." He once warned an unscientific annotator to stay away from the lepidopteral allusions in *Lolita*, "a tricky subject"; and he complained of Diana Butler's essay, "Lolita Lepidoptera," that it was so ill-informed as to be "jarring and absurd." Yet Nabokov's writing is so full of references to *Lycaenids* and hawkmoths, *Vanessa atalantas* and Red Admirables, and his style is so permeated with the taxonomical Latin he used (beginning in 1929) in his published entomology papers, that the role cannot be ignored. Clearly Nabokov delighted in the resemblances between these two pursuits: "In high art and pure science [he once wrote] detail is everything." In *Speak, Memory* he associated nature's "mimetic subtlety, exuberance, and luxury" with art: "I discovered in nature the non-utilitarian delights that I sought in art. Both were a form of magic, both were a game of intricate enchantment and deception." Not surprisingly, he chose to conclude *Strong Opinions* (1974), his only collection of "public prose," with five papers on lepidoptera. The non-specialist reader cannot hope to follow him into this labyrinthine realm, of course, except to glimpse his linguistic pleasure in describing species with exactitude. Perhaps that was part of that book's strategy: to dissolve at the end into another identity.

More than once Nabokov claimed that his years at Harvard's Museum of Comparative Zoology were the "most delightful and thrilling in all my adult life." He remarked to Edmund Wilson in all seriousness, "Wars pass, bugs stay." For him the dullest bore could metamorphose, at the drop of a collecting box, into a treasured friend, perhaps the "greatest living authority on springtails or tumblebugs." He once spoke of "the thrill which accumulation of new knowledge, absolutely useless to the layman, gives to its first beget-

ter." The logic of this intense enthusiasm lies in a peculiar aspect of Nabokov's theory of art. He likes to assert that the artist is supreme, *sui generis*, the only begetter of his worlds; he sometimes favors the notion (as do many of his critics) that fiction should be a competition or "clash . . . between the composer and the hypothetical solver," just as it is in chess problems. But that theory entraps him in a sterile world, the prison of a solipsist or a narcissist. When Nabokov could connect his own intricately-fabricated art with nature's—rather than only with himself—he could escape that prison. The natural scientist in him, the lepidopterist who felt he had access to the creative processes of nature, allowed him to imagine a greater sort of genius than his own, the "contrapuntal genius of human fate," as he put it in *Speak, Memory*. Whether Nabokov believed in God matters less than the question of how he manages to escape himself.

Nabokov enjoyed nothing so much as the competitive clash of intelligent people, as his correspondence with Edmund Wilson richly proves.³ Here is a distinctly different identity: the literary intellectual and disputant. Nabokov had learned this role perhaps from his feisty high school teacher, Vladimir Grippius, and had practiced it with relish in the 1930s when various critics launched *ad hominem* attacks on his "useless" works. But with Wilson he wanted only to enjoy "many a pleasant tussle," with neither yielding an inch. Sensing that Wilson had misunderstood a criticism of *To the Finland Station* in a 1940 letter, Nabokov hastened to reassure him: "I wrote to you as I would have done to a compatriot," he said, and closed with a suggestion of what he wished their exchanges to be: "*Du choc des opinions jaillit la vérité* like a football which provokes a wild scramble all over again." Whether the truth sprang up out of their knocking heads together is debatable, but the rest of the sentence was wonderfully prophetic.

They continued to disagree about Wilson's version of Lenin in *To the Finland Station*. They argued fiercely about prosody and metrics, and each presumed to instruct the other in his native language. They caught and corrected solecisms in each other's letters as well as in their latest publications. They admired each other's works, and said so; but when they did not, they said so. Wilson was blunt about his dislike of *Bend Sinister* and *Lolita*; Nabokov could not fathom Wilson's respect for Malraux, Silone, and Faulkner. Wilson tried to correct Nabokov's interest in Norman Douglas's *South Wind* and Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*; Nabokov tried to undercut Wilson's admiration for Henry James (*What Maisie Knew* "is terrible. Perhaps there is some *other* Henry James and I am continuously hitting upon the wrong one?"). They even disagreed about whether the Russian character "Ж" resembled a butterfly (Wilson) or a beetle (Nabokov). Yet for all their contentiousness, these letters were to Nabokov at least a wonderful stimulus. Years after the correspon-

³ *The Nabokov-Wilson Letters, 1940–1971*, ed. Simon Karlinsky (New York, Harper and Row, 1979).

dence had waned and their brilliantly nasty dispute in the pages of *The New York Review of Books* made them enemies (I wish Karlinsky had included it with the letters), Nabokov wrote to the dying Wilson in 1971 that he had just re-read their correspondence: "It was such a pleasure to feel again the warmth of your many kindnesses, the various thrills of our friendship, that constant excitement of art and intellectual discovery."

For Nabokov the correspondence was an opportunity to be impulsive, improvisatory, and protean. We will probably never see his writing so unrevised, so *sur le vif*, as this. He said once it was like "keeping a diary." While Wilson tends to remain factual and a bit gruff, working rapidly down each item on his (numbered!) agenda, Nabokov does a little of everything: satirizes hilarious types met on his lecture tour; describes the right way to go mothing; asks for help with editors and publishers; explains the *duel à volonté*; complains of tourists in Taos and goldenrod in Vermont; praises his own productions ("another tremendous chapter!"); tries out puns, palindromes, clerihews, and amphisbaenic poems; raves about entomological America ("Never in my life, not even in the wilds of Asia, have I had such good collecting as here"); criticizes his own failures of sympathy and tact; complains of illnesses and lack of money ("I love to complain"); and even at moments sounds a note of depression or despair. Far more than a combative ego is behind this many-layered self. It conveys a kind of restless and leaping creativity, where almost any verbal fun is possible. "Give my love to Nicholas and tell him that he never answered a long letter which I wrote, or meant to write, him."

Nabokov's personality lends itself easily to anecdote and brief reminiscence. When a colleague at Cornell appeared one morning with his arm in a sling, Nabokov is said to have said instantly, "Ah, a duel!" But deeper access to the man has proved virtually impossible. Andrew Field's biography⁴ attempts bravely to entrap its subject, multiplying facts about the writer's father, the school he attended, his wife Vera and her father, the endless branchings of the Nabokov family tree—while Nabokov recedes ever further from the page. No mere information can rival the authentic fictions of *Speak, Memory*. Field does best with the Berlin years, giving useful dates of composition, background for such works as *Glory* and *The Gift*, the remarks of relatives and friends, portions of letters from Nabokov to his mother, and a clear account of the Russian *émigré* literary scene in Berlin. But he knows that Nabokov, who first encouraged the proposed biography, remains "my competitor." Field mentions Nabokov's Pushkinian sideburns c. 1923; Nabokov denies they ever existed; Field shows him the photograph; Nabokov decides they are a "mere shadow." As Field writes ruefully, Nabokov has "an ingrained conviction that all *facts* . . . are basically extrinsic to his self

⁴ *Nabokov: His Life in Part*, by Andrew Fields. (New York, Viking Press, 1977).

if they do not come from himself." Which is to say, in the last analysis, that only he could invent himself.

Field tries to meet these difficulties by surrendering authority. He gave Nabokov the manuscript and permitted his additional contributions. These appear in bold-face type: interruptions, clarifications, corrections, denials. He in turn is interrupted and quietly corrected by his wife, or by his sister, or by his close friend George Hessen. Perhaps *du choc des opinions jaillit la vérité*, but more often one senses the infinite regress of mirrored mirrors. "To think that George Hessen could say such a thing!" Nabokov will remark. "He's got it all wrong, absolutely wrong!" Alfred Appel, another would-be Boswell, had comparable experiences.⁵ Nabokov told him the story of teaching tennis in Berlin and having to sneak onto the courts of a private club: "we'd arrive early to head off any rival poachers, and lurk behind trees like spies or sporty detectives in an old film . . ."; but Vera Nabokov has discounted this story as "completely and absolutely out of character," more likely a leg-pulling parody of a scene in *Lolita*. That seems very likely; he was, as Pnin said of his narrator, "a dreadful liar." Andrew Field's reaction to such episodes was to crave a glimpse of the real Nabokov, something other than the person impersonated at Montreux. "I wonder sometimes that he does not tire of it," writes Field who *is* tired of it, "for he seems too good an actor to be satisfied with a lifelong character part." Field gets his glimpse, his "one fragment of pure Nabokov," but it proves trivial, only a token of an illusion Field himself has invented. He concludes dismally that there is nothing in his book "which is not open to serious question or challenge," and he decides that biography itself is "a sorry genre." One can only wonder why Field, who has written what is still the best single book on Nabokov (*Nabokov: His Life in Art*, 1967), should wish to find "pure Nabokov" anywhere but in his written works.

The personae of Nabokov's fiction have long puzzled and teased his readers for the quality and extent of self-reference in them. From his first novel, *Mary* (1926), with its version of the author's first love which we can compare to the autobiographical version in *Speak, Memory* (Ch. 12), all the way to *Look at the Harlequins!* (1974) with its parody references to his whole literary career, Nabokov has spun characters out of himself or aspects of himself. "People tend to underestimate the power of my imagination and my capacity of evolving serial selves in my writing," he warned in a 1964 interview, annoyed at how often readers assumed he "was" Humbert Humbert or Van Veen or Charles Kinbote. None of these fictive selves *is* the author, of course; even when the resemblances are close (e.g., Sebastian Knight, Fyodor Gudunov-Cherdyntsev, the narrator of *Pnin*), they prove John Shade's point: "Resemblances are the shadows of differences." It might be tempting to conclude that Nabokov

⁵ Alfred Appel, "Remembering Nabokov," in *Vladimir Nabokov: A Tribute*, ed. Peter Quennell (New York, William Morrow & Company, 1980), p. 28.

is just an intensely self-absorbed writer, who derived pleasure from representing himself and then escaping, lest his narcissism become apparent, only to represent himself shamelessly again. But I think the real significance of Nabokov's tactic lies in the notion of identity itself: he sensed it was a conceptual prison. He wanted to un-define it, to expand and diversify and thus explode it completely. The following passage from *The Gift* (Ch. 3) gives an apt indication of how this could happen:

What [Fyodor] should really be teaching was . . . multi-level thinking: you look at a person and you see him as clearly as if he were fashioned of glass and you were the glass blower, while at the same time without in the least impinging upon that clarity you notice some trifle on the side—such as the similarity of the telephone receiver's shadow to a huge, slightly crushed ant, and (all this simultaneously) the convergence is joined by a third thought—the memory of a sunny evening at a Russian small railway station; i.e., images having no rational connection with the conversation you are carrying on while your mind runs around the outside of your own words and along the inside of those of your interlocutor.

This presents a virtual paradigm of Nabokov's theory of fiction. Its chief features are multiplicity and simultaneity; it suggested that more than one point of view might be conveyed in a single paragraph or sentence or phrase. But Fyodor could only explain it; how can it actually be done in a narrative that would still be clear? Not even Joyce, in the analytical-cubist painting of the "Wandering Rocks" chapter of *Ulysses*, could do it without fragmenting the point of view.

Nabokov's well-known short story, "The Vane Sisters" (1959)—first published in these pages—provides a good example. Its point of view seems to belong to one of those heartless snobs Nabokov impersonates so well, a French professor in an American college who has had and forgotten an affair with an eccentric artist, Cynthia Vane. When he issues such remarks as "The coarse texture of her epiderm looked almost masculine, and, in the stark lamplight of her studio, you could see the pores of her thirty-two-year-old face fairly gaping at you like something in an aquarium," we recognize that Nabokov is using the familiar convention of unreliable first-person narrative. Our speaker begins by telling of his chance meeting with "D.," a former colleague who had a messy affair with a student, Sybil Vane, Cynthia's younger sister. This brings back memories of how the cruel D. ditched Sybil, prompting her suicide, and then a very mixed assortment of memories of his own affair with Cynthia—for the narrator has just learned of Cynthia's death. It all ends anti-climactically, with the narrator's insomnia and un-

easy dream as further evidence of his imperfect conscience over the Cynthia affair. But that is only the beginning.

In a 1966 preface Nabokov gave his readers a tip⁶: the final paragraph of the story “has been used acrostically by two dead girls to assert their mysterious participation in the story.” The message reads: “iciclesbycynthiameterfrommesybil,” or with editing, “Icicles by Cynthia, meter from me. Sybil.” This sends us back to the opening paragraphs of the story, where the voice we thought was the narrator’s has described “a family of brilliant icicles drip-dripping from the eaves of a frame house.” Now the point of view has been doubled; the foreground narrator has become transparent, and through him the spirits of the Vane sisters speak. Not just the opening paragraphs but the whole story can now be seen as the product, simultaneously, of the narrator’s skeptical rationality and of Cynthia Vane’s dreamy artistic vision. A painter of “glass-bright minutiae,” a believer in “intervenient auras,” Cynthia has a “centrifugal nature” or a personality with “a rainbow edge as if a little out of focus.” The narrator recalls how he grew tired of “strange Cynthia” with her “odds and ids” and decided to “stop seeing her altogether.” But the reader continues to “see Cynthia,” whose phantom penetrates not just the narrator’s final dream but the whole story. By this ingenious double perspective, Nabokov can question if not utterly refute the narrator’s commonsense views on such things as soul, spirit, “the possible persistence of discarnate life,” and love. “The Vane Sisters” thus becomes a sort of dialogue of self and soul.

Yet that is not the end of it, for the story’s point of view is more than double. *Both* Sybil and Cynthia send their messages to the narrator, as we learn at the end, both the neat actressy little Sybil with her wry wit and “several demon hands” and the “frowsy” Cynthia with her painterly eye for light and transparency. At this level D. becomes an essential part of the design as well, having dismissed one Vane sister as the narrator dismissed the other. Failing to recognize himself in D’s behavior, the narrator criticizes D. for feeling nothing when he ought to have been harassed “at every step with wailing and writhing memories.” Through this quadruple identity, still other kinds of consciousness are simultaneously accessible. Sybil Vane’s literary antecedent of the same name is the pathetic young actress who commits suicide when Dorian Gray abandons her in Oscar Wilde’s novel (at one of Cynthia’s séances Wilde’s spirit angrily accuses her parents of “*plagiatisme*”!). When the insomniac narrator turns to Shakespeare’s sonnets, sensing that Cynthia’s ghost may be sending him messages in the first letters of each line, he fails to read the real messages in the poems he examines (70, 88, 120, 131)

⁶ In his Contributor’s Note to the original *Hudson Review* publication (Vol. XI, No. 4, Winter 1958–59) the author left the following clue: “Puzzle-minded readers of ‘The Vane Sisters’ may be interested in looking for the coded message that occurs on the last page of the story.”

which address a selfish lover's betrayals.⁷ Shakespeare's spirit no less than the others surely participates in these accusations. Quite a crowd has gathered around the tilting table of this fiction.

Another dissolving identity in the story is Cynthia's friend Porlock, "an eccentric librarian," whose name sends the narrator's mind back to Coleridge's "imperishable poem," which he calls "yet another fake dream." "Kubla Khan" was interrupted and never finished, according to Coleridge's fable, because "a man from Porlock" came to the door. Nabokov's allusion to the name here may serve simply as a reminder of the imperishable realm of art and imagination to which the narrator only pays lip service. But "Porlock" has another, and even more appropriate, avatar:

"Porlock, Watson, is a nom-de-plume, a mere identification mark; but behind it lies a shifty and evasive personality. . . . he frankly informed me that the name was not his own, and defied me ever to trace him . . . Porlock is important, not for himself, but for the great man [Moriarty] with whom he is in touch."

Nabokov must have liked these words of Sherlock Holmes,⁸ because they evoke just the sort of multiplied identity he wished to create in fiction. "The Vane Sisters" is the product of several different kinds of consciousness, several "demon hands." We may attribute all of them to "Nabokov," and call him "grandmaster" or "puppeteer" as many critics have; but "Nabokov" is a mere identification mark, like "V. Sirin" or "Vivian Darkbloom," and important not for himself but for what he makes possible: an art which glories in "combinational delights." Behind that, ultimately, was a strong spiritual curiosity, which he liked to disguise or pretend to mock. Many-layered identities and multilevel thinking were a means of exploring the unknowable, or at least trying to look in the right direction. As his stand-in, the narrator of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, expresses it, "the soul is but a manner of being—not a constant state—[and] any soul may be yours, if you find and follow its undulations. The hereafter may be the full ability of consciously living in any chosen soul, all of them unconscious of their interchangeable burden." Whatever one may think about these possibilities, they resulted in a series of breathtakingly original innovations in the art of fiction.

⁷ See David Eggenschwiler, "Nabokov's 'The Vane Sisters': Exuberant Pedantry and a Biter Bit," *Studies in Short Fiction* (Winter, 1981), pp. 33–39.

⁸ Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Valley of Fear*, Ch. 1.

J. D. McCLATCHY

Poetry Chronicle

CROSS-EXAMINED ON HIS MOTIVES, what poet could not claim that issuing a Selected Poems is an act of self-defense? Within a few years of publication, it is hard to find any collection of poems, so quickly do they go out of print. And libraries are often as unreliable as bookstores. A new generation of readers (and the good poets might as well be defined as those whose poems continue to make new generations of readers for themselves) will often be at a literal loss without a Selected. But such practical reasons are not the only, or even the primary, motive. It is in the nature of any creator to want to keep making his work over in his own image, and at a certain point in his career a poet will want his poems to be read not as he has written them but as he has come to read them himself: as a sort of autobiography, a lifework. A poet's own selection from his work is not so much a judgment of time as an effort to give a shape to the body of his work, to put his own partial stamp on it, to delineate and emphasize its presiding themes and recurring strategies, its stylistic changes and temperamental development. Two recent Selecteds—both of them, let us call them, Revised Standards—highlight the process.

Peter Davison's *Walking the Boundaries: Poems 1957–1974* appeared a decade ago, and his new Selected¹ is a greatly revamped edition of that book. Individual poems have been retouched, the order of the books reversed, the arrangement and inclusion of poems within each collection much changed. Most of *A Voice in the Mountain* (1977) and *Barn Fever* (1981) has been added, plus a dozen new poems written since and gathered under the heading "The Vanishing Point." "I write of journeys, landscapes, interventions, / inheritances visible, alive, or dead," he says in a poem called "Thanksgiving." And so he has.

I remember buying, back in 1971, the chapbook edition of "Dark Houses," his elegy for his father, the poet Edward Davison, and being struck not only by its moving, even startling portrait (transparencies of age stripped away, decade by decade, until the dead man stood up again, and stood *in* for the poet himself, both the father and the son), but being struck too by this whole notion of *inheritance*. He has written about it in many ways over the years before

¹ PRAYING WRONG: NEW AND SELECTED POEMS 1957–1984, by Peter Davison. Atheneum. \$18.95; \$9.95.

and since then: the claims of family (in his case, a quite mixed and enriching claim, with his Jewish mother and English father), the dark genetic fates, the landowner's ties to soil and community, even the succession of voices in poetry itself, from the Roman poets to Robert Frost, Davison's early mentor. Strangely enough, at its root, the word "inherit" means not to lay hold of, not to come into one's own, but to let go, to be released. It can refer to a place, a particular spot, but it means an *empty* space. And it also means to go, to travel, as in a man's *gait*. It is helpful to keep these submerged meanings of "inheritance" in mind while reading Davison's poems.

From the beginning, he has wanted to write about what is closest to him. His family, of course. Increasingly in his more recent work, his salt-marsh farm in Gloucester, Massachusetts, and the life on it he shares with others, with the soil, the animals, the seasons. But he is close, too, to ideas, to the abstracted, perplexed conditions of life with others. Each of these *empty spaces*—a person, a place, an idea—he explores and fills in with meaning. It seems to me that his best—or perhaps, most characteristic—poems are actually sequences, clusters of perspectives, second thoughts, revised feelings; in each part of the poem, a part of himself released, inherited. Many older poems—modest, skilled, mindful, heartfelt—have in this new edition been grouped together. Most of the new poems in the book do not maintain the same standard, but one sequence, "Nothing Sudden," about the death of his first wife, does. Let me quote the last section of it, "The Revenant":

Last night, rummaging for scissors
 in a back drawer, his fingers touched
 something alive, not alive,
 a pouch concealed under papers,
 an envelope with no address.
 In it, a lock of graying hair,
 lopped from her head before the Cytosin, cure-all,
 not able to save her,
 had struck her bald.
 His hand now cradled one part
 that had sprouted from her body,
 many times assenting to
 the touch of his fingers.
 Her hair! The only frailty
 she'd admit to! Her doctor,
 never lowering his gaze,
 told her she had a year to go,
 adding of course he could "make her
 more comfortable" with chemotherapy.
 Her hands flew to her head, frightened birds
 to save her hair. They fell at once

fluttering to her lap. She had to laugh
 at herself, the hands. But not at the hair.
 "I'm sorry," she said, aghast
 at her own reasons.

*The Fact of a Doorframe*² is actually the fourth selection of Adrienne Rich's work. From *Poems Selected and New 1950–1984* she has deleted 34 poems, mostly from early books, and restored twelve, added the bulk (all but twelve poems) of *The Dream of a Common Language* (1978) and *A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far* (1981), along with six poems written since but not the long poem *Sources* published as a small book by the Heyeck Press in 1983. It is fascinating to watch her, in the back-of-the-book Notes, arguing with herself and instructing her reader, pointing to changes she's made in pronouns or attitudes over the years. Rich has always been an essentially revisionary poet. Since the late 1960s she has been empowered to write down her life at the pitch of vision, to fashion contemporary myths that allow us to rethink our lives and to correct our feelings. "The energy of language," she once told an interviewer, "comes somewhat from the pressure and need and unbearableness of what's being done to you. . . . There seems to be a connection between an oppressed condition and having access to certain kinds of energy, vitality and subjectivity." During the 1970s she abandoned the comfortable gestures and smooth rhetoric of her early books, and turned with an often startling intensity on herself: her marriage and children, the nature of emotional and social relationships, the stresses on them and the oppression they cause, the civil turmoil and warring blindness in America then. Rich's poems of those years remain a mirror, the truest one, of that time in our national life, and a reminder that our lives in the world are determined by a balance within. The conflict between the energies of creation and the energies of relation played itself out in poem after poem—each one meant by the poet to be an instrument of discovery and analysis:

I am an instrument in the shape
 of a woman trying to translate pulsations
 into images for the relief of the body
 and the reconstruction of the mind.

For some years now, too, her radical feminism has been the abiding passion of her work; it is both an argument with the self and the effort, as much poetic as personal, to recover a power prior to patriarchy. "Think," she asks us, "of the deprivation of women liv-

² THE FACT OF A DOORFRAME: POEMS SELECTED AND NEW 1950–1984, by Adrienne Rich. W. W. Norton. \$18.95; \$9.95.

ing for centuries without a poetry which spoke of women together, of women alone, of women as anything but the fantasies of men." That passion has since been subsumed by Rich's lesbianism, which she sees as an emotional component, not a sexual characteristic; it is a quality shared by all, and "the primary intensity between women." (I hear the accent of Whitman in that, of his *Democratic Vistas*, our national manifesto for a democracy of ideal eroticism.) Rich has never been polemical about these matters, except in her essays, even though some of her latest poetry is turning didactic. She knows that "no true political poetry can be written with propaganda as an aim," but only from "the poet's need to identify her relationship to atrocities and injustice, the sources of her pain, fear, and anger, the meaning of her resistance." Those identities, let us call them, are strongest in *The Dream of a Common Language*, one of the dozen best books published over the past decade. There is not only pain and resistance in that book, there is an extraordinary intelligence and craft, and a sense of celebration:

*What does love mean
what does it mean "to survive"
burning together in the snow We will not live
to settle for less We have dreamed of this
all of our lives.*

This new selection of Rich's poetry not only traces a brilliant career, but is a testament to her devotion to a difficult art, to her ability to transform poetry and thereby us all.

On the dust jacket of Marea Gordett's³ first collection, it says she "began to write poetry in the fifth grade." When I opened the book and found a poem that starts "When I was five Jimmy Ornstein chased my sister / around the apple tree and caught her," I wondered if some of those fifth grade poems had been included. In better poems this is a tone rather than a point of view. Gordett is attracted by childhood's haunted innocence—a far more complex matter than her technique can explore. The other portraits in her book are versions of the child, all of them cheerful victims: there are factory town vignettes with "half-wits in the luncheonette," monologues in immigrant dialect, the toils of a Chinese neighbor, and the long title sequence. This last is an account, in fifteen parts, of one Hayyim, who starts in Russia with dybbuks and dirty sausages and shuls, and goes on to honeymoon in Miami Beach, settle down as a factory owner with a bored wife who watches TV as he dreams of the black bread of memory: "No breeze. It's gone. / And the woman who couldn't even speak / the new language. / And my brother and sister. / Dozens of names falling into the grate / like

³ FREEZE TAG, by Marea Gordett. Wesleyan University Press. \$15.00; \$6.95.

spring rain." The story is meant to be funny and affecting; at times, it is both, but it is not really a poem. This is the sort of ethnic material best left to Singer or Bellow, and in any case has already been done to death. In other poems, Gordett tries the giggly *tripotage* of contemporary surrealism:

I always loved the word *foothills*.
 A little shape of nothing stands in the hills
 pygmying out its life. On the other
 hand, I hate the words *pretty*, *cuneiform*, and *hog*.
 Today, driving to the pretty foot-
 hills, a cuneiform hog dashed across the sky.

Et cetera. In his *Anima Poetae*, Coleridge remembers a sentence that came to him in a dream: "Varrius thus prophesied vinegar at his door by damned frigid tremblings." He was bemused by the nonsense. Latter-day poets take it seriously. There is no need for readers to.

Two other first books are far more substantial and accomplished. From the start—and she starts with sunlight drilling a road through cloud—it is clear that Wendy Battin⁴ is an unusually gifted poet. She doesn't look to nature *for* metaphors; she looks to it *as* metaphor. I would say she has a deeply religious imagination, if that adjective weren't now suspect; let me say, instead, that she is, at her best, a quintessentially American poet. She has her eye on origins and ends. Occasionally she will domesticate her subjects: an almost full moon is called "shy," or "clouds / open and close like gauze curtains." But it is more likely she will take the homely object and open it up, open it out toward experience and inward toward subjectivity:

Only strike the log
 and the fire explodes in it:

 beneath it the coals repeat
 the catalogue of forms the planet

 sleeps through: red mesas,
 black doorways into the glowing

 city, bright masks rehearsing
 the possible, the remembered:

 this fire eating wood is the earth's
 long dream of itself in a small brick

⁴ IN THE SOLAR WIND, by Wendy Battin. Doubleday. \$10.95; \$6.95.

cave, in this cabin framed by January
birches: the living drink light

and the dead give it back
as flame . . .

She can be a bold but is never a capricious poet; she moves freely among startling associations and levels of imagery. Such an intensity of imagination is hard to sustain in any case, and Battin's book falters in the middle. The lineation is unsteady, the phrasing slack. When her language most resembles that of the Lumpenpoetariat ("Your face / is clear as good whiskey, telling me / lies"), she is least convincing. But at her best, in half a dozen poems here, she writes with an austere elegance not unlike Charles Wright's or even some of Sylvia Plath. There are few props in her poems. No gags or gestures, no autobiography or anecdote. Some readers may find her work too impersonal and chilly. They would be wrong. Comparing Mallarmé with Balzac, Valéry once said that a poet should also be valued for what he has *left out* of his work. Battin prefers to take a few terms—a landscape, a loneliness, a god, a molecule—and work variations on them. I look forward to her new poems, and hope she does not weaken or abandon her fierce lyrical assault on the high places.

Rosanna Warren⁵ is a very different sort of poet. She is more varied and restless than Battin. Her settings shift; indeed, it would be fair to say that this book has an itinerary—Crete, Tuscany, New York City, Baltimore, New Haven, a Maine island. And Warren moves about quickly within any one poem, darting through image and idea. Suddenly a butter churn is the grail; lilac and rotting fish-bait are thrown together; the *bella figura* of Renaissance art is a conspirator's corpse, hanging with his tongue stuck out. The sound of her voice is nervous—a hurried, abrupt staccato—and her diction can turn from rapture to slang the likes of "shebang" and "bug-house." The results are often exhilarating.

It comes as no surprise to read that, as an undergraduate, Warren studied painting at Yale. It is not so much that painting is her subject, though there is plenty of art here, from an Egyptian fresco to a jigsaw puzzle, Renoir and Turner. But she writes with a painterly eye. Usually this is instinctive, the way a scene is arranged, the figures placed, how the color is laid on. At other times it is explicit:

Ben's at school,
the house clenches its calm,
the *Times* softly delivers its daily harm
in grisaille blur, but geometrical:

⁵ EACH LEAF SHINES SEPARATE, by Rosanna Warren. W.W. Norton. \$14.95; \$6.95.

pyramid-hunched, a mother grieves
 over small bodies arranged in a row;
 elsewhere, a darkhaired boy
 stands alone as the last jeep leaves

under a charred, rectangular swatch of sky.
 The scenes are about
 suffering, how it lurches out
 of any picture, giving the lie

to pity, to composition.

Seeing suffering as art, and then remembering how art helps us to see suffering. And in her view, art is at the center of Warren's world, the still center between the questions of birth and death that dominate her book. The birth of her daughter, celebrated in poems toward the end of the book, is balanced by deaths that haunt earlier poems. "Funerary Portraits" is an exquisite animation of Hellenistic bas-reliefs. Still more immediate is "Snow Day." The poet is in a room of her own: "I have nothing to say on a white afternoon." That nothing-to-say is slowly transformed from a silence into a macabre burden:

And I think
 of my friend, who was
 not really my friend,
 except for the death in her eyes, which were round
 and wise like a turtle's.
 I think of my friend and the snow, because
 of that blank haven she found
 when the Buick spun into her last snow day
 on Route whatever-it-was, toward nightfall, and she
 had no way to say what it was that she knew
 with glass in her eyes and her mouth full of snow.

Love, too, mediates. Lovers walk over old battlefields here, or sit by flowing streams. Always the moment of love—"We believed in our bodies, as we believe in words / while the pen moves"—is posed against larger rhythms of departure and precedent. And if Warren writes of a rather literary passion, it is no less real for being so composed. It is still "this strange / space we invent / separately day by day between us." It is this space between things, invented and separating, that fascinates this new poet. It draws her to themes of isolation and reconciliation, and it draws from her a dappled and finally a radiant eloquence.

Now I want to turn to a few of the many second books of this season. I can imagine a reader using the word "slight" about James

Richardson's⁶ poems; he might have been led to the word by Richardson's tone, which is diffident, or by his point of view, which can be oblique. At first glance they may seem somewhat *withheld*. But in no sense are these poems small; they are twice distilled. One hears in some of them (in "Another Spring" and "Lines Separated by Years") the organ-note of Rilke, and in others the rasp of Lowell. One begins: "Years back, my plunge for viceroys slowed / in waist-high musk." There is nothing that isn't vivid description, and yet the line is pitched higher than the picturesque. There are times when these lines surge into song:

May, and O might,
updraft and spin of blossom, can
all our furl, human,
untwist for this ridiculous
rose-must and white—in love with trees?

And in certain set-pieces ("Tastes of Time," "Essay on Birds") he can be broad. But it is more usual for Richardson to hover over his subjects, to *exact* from them their nuances and pathos. The title poem, if it is set anywhere but in a private memory, is set east of Eden. It is Richardson's gloss on the solitary way a couple takes. The couple in his poem are at dinner:

clattering
among white plates
in the modest labor of being together.

Nothing divine, you see. No voice
told us anything about the future,
except that there is none
and we are free. Life has
already happened. Now that it's over
we can talk it over,
and do again what we liked.

It is not any bored sense of *déjà vu* which drives these poems, but the uncanny sense of *déjà vécu*. Here, plucked from different poems, is this same note: "the days / arrive like memory, already lived"; "It seems that we / are almost accidentally alive"; "time's your own / memory devouring the present." And this, from "Universal Movies":

This is the invitation: that your life is over
and they are young, even the gray ones, vivid,

⁶ SECOND GUESSES, by James Richardson. Wesleyan University Press. \$16.00; \$8.95.

almost wet, like monarchs flushed from the chrysalis.
 Their voices rise from just one source, or two.

This is less a repeated note than a held note. Throughout this book are poems of loss and its disorientations. They constitute what the poet calls a “parallel universe, not mine / yet identical to the last detail,” and he moves between himself (that is to say, his mature, meditative voice) and this shifting shadow world of figures and images. The death of a brother and a divorce—both of them experiences of letting go that refuse to let go the poet—are behind the book’s strongest poems. “Charlottesville, Sleep” recounts his divorce with a reticence and dark wit that don’t hide but rather shape the pain. Here, complete, is the section called “Dividing the House”:

Eloquent as stuck drawers, we come out
 with everything, too late, too hard.
 Today we’re praising
 self-sufficiency. No tears.

What you wear shears off
 from what wore you.
 For your endurance, take the house.
 I take, for wandering, the car.

They’re all so odd, the props
 of intimacy stranded in the yard
 with the perfection of toys.
 Though there were no children of this marriage
 but you and me. I wonder
 how they will do without us.

Those stanzas, too, include the words that best describe the entire book: intimate and eloquent.

James Galvin⁷ would be, I suppose, Central Casting’s idea of a poet. His work is both rugged and tender, wants to sound both oracular and engaging. The setting for much of it is his native Mountain States—high ground, elemental and grand. Reg Saner is now the laureate of that locale. Galvin’s is more a “landscape of sighs.” The narratives in *God’s Mistress*—anecdotes, really—are peopled by Lyle and Ray and Ernie. It is a man’s world, fly-fishing and tough times. “There is no philosophy of death where I live,” the poet says, “Only philosophies of suffering.” It is relieved by the land itself. Galvin has looked lovingly at it, if not long enough. “Dark Angel,” for instance, is a sequence of striking images. Here are a couple of them:

⁷ GOD’S MISTRESS, by James Galvin. Harper & Row. \$12.95.; \$6.95.

When an ocean goes away

the prairie is just its shadow staying.
Even the wind
makes shadows sometimes—

that's what snowdrifts are,
and why they can't lie down except
in the small lees

of draws and clumps of sage,
and why, up higher,
the deep timber fills.

But there are problems. His style is Workshop Drab, with its flat constant present tense, its prayerful banalities, laid-back syntax, its automatic aphorisms ("Small towns are for knowing who's poor"; "The pier is less like a bridge than a well, / Since it leads to water."). His poems can be not only thin but also—strangely—garrulous:

Then, by the gymnasium
I saw a girl
in a green leotard with long sleeves.
She wasn't just any girl,
She was a dancer,
which is to say only
she didn't regret
her body.
She moved in it
and it moved.
She spun herself around.
She wasn't dancing, exactly,
more like she was practicing a dance,
getting the moves right,
which moved me
even more.

Are we expected to treat that as a poem? Hold it up to the light that shines from poems by Keats and Crane and Stevens? At other times, I don't have the impression that Galvin has even thought about what he is saying. Here is a stanza that follows mention of a pine tree:

Its particularity is awesome.
The blue flower whose name I never remember
Joys through the eyeholes of a horse's skull,
A horse named Lola we kids rode.

“Awesome”? “Joys”? And why doesn’t he find out that flower’s name? And why didn’t old Lola get a decent burial? Everything in the stanza seems to be there merely for effect, and the effect can be ludicrous. There are similar blemishes nearly everywhere. Some of Galvin’s better work is in the several prose poems here. What, spaced thinly down the page, is tedious to read, gains momentum and interest when laid out as prose. “A Second Time” is a fine piece of writing about losing a lover. It opens this way:

It was the year I cut logs for the new house and roads, roads like veins that let the timber bleed. You wore a different shawl each day. It was the year I shot the white mare, and her filly, equally white, refused to follow the herd to winter pasture. It was the year you left me the first time, before the aspen turned. Then it was the winter the sky couldn’t get off the ground. East wind went down the chimney and filled the house with smoke.

And it closes, after some involving paragraphs, with an image of early settlers who, when they moved on, “burned their houses down to get the nails back.” With the same nails, Galvin could have built a stronger book. Perhaps the next time he will.

“Jagged peaks promise permanence but change, planed by rock-slides, cut by avalanche, crushed, eroded, leached of minerals,” writes Grace Schulman. Her *Hemispheres*⁸ is bounded by peaks, by images of permanence, like the Sutton Hoo treasure she writes about, “a resurrection shell.” The first line in the book, characteristically a benediction, is “Blessed is the light that turns to fire.” The last stanza in the book ends:

You’ll see a God of fire trailing stars,
climb ladders, see the chariot throne, and still
survive unharmed. Through blinding flame, through water,
you enter seven heavens and fall, whole.

Fire is the image of the fierce song she hears in things eternal, and it burns in many poems here, quickening and sometimes searing. But even in the midst of her assurances is a dark counter-flame:

Echocardiogram,
nymph invisible but for a song,
restore me now, but why does the heart grow numb
to the rock-faced man who died alone, despairing?

Radar angel, what of the hawk’s sway,

⁸ HEMISPHERES, by Grace Schulman. Sheep Meadow Press. \$13.95; \$7.95.

the bulrush, marigolds, the heron's cry,
 of earth's erratic lights and shadows? There
 let your needle calculate disorder.

Schulman is not a calculator, but an ecstatic. At times, she is a contemporary mystic in her impassioned ascents to song: "Borders that terrify have summoned me / to cancel edges, nullify horizons." But it is precisely disorder—an emotional avalanche and leaching—that is at the heart of her book, a series of poems about violated borders. The poems recount a love affair with a married (certainly) Israeli (I gather), an affair bounded by law and geography, by secrecy ("our hidden marriage") and frustration. The Other Woman's side of the story has not often been told in poetry, and Schulman's is riveting. The title of the book comes to be a reference to their affair ("we are two ruined / halves of one whole angel, doomed to fall"), and to its end. Each separation foretells the final one:

Half-lives, half-selves. I, too, am split apart.
 You call me by false names, guarding our doorways.
 In waterfront cafés, I watch the sea,
 you scan the land for some familiar faces,
 until we part and shatter into halves
 or break like rock into a thousand pieces.

I do not want to leave the impression, however, that Schulman can only write like a desert saint. There is wit, too. The serious, allusive kind, as when we suddenly encounter Paolo and Francesca in an unlikely place: "Our clothes will spin together in the laundromat: / doomed lovers circle, drifting on the winds." And elsewhere she is lighthearted, as when she writes of her grandmother's grandfather who emigrated from Romania to Kansas: "Sliding a skull-cap under a wide-brimmed hat, / you wore a Star of David and a sheriff's badge." Socrates says that a man is not to be considered a master of harmony simply because he knows how to produce the highest possible note and the lowest possible on his strings. Schulman sounds the middle notes as well.

The limitation of space forces me now to mention, rather than detail, the excellences of two other second books. William Logan's *Moorhen*⁹ is, for the most part, a suite of poems about the Matter of Britain. His England is not the green and pleasant land of weirs and chalk cliffs. In Logan's cathedrals are rockers with "pink Mohawk spikes," and outside "pregnant school-leavers roll like tanks / their bulky prams along crazed walks." Here are Darwin and Dodgson, but also the "poisoned swan ghosting through bare waters toward / shires flaked of steel and coal." He has wisely chosen Auden

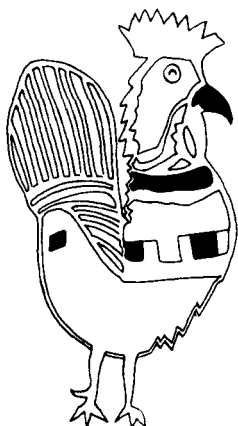
⁹ MOORHEN, by William Logan. Abbatoir Editions. \$22.50.

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as a model (his "The Barbarian Sack of Rome" is almost too directly modeled on "The Fall of Rome"), and like Auden's, Logan's lines bristle with ideas, with booklore, with language that's alive. This is an astringent and inventive book.

Medbh McGuckian¹⁰ would have us believe there are two kinds of light. One gives off "an artlessness too / Painful to live with." The other, the light that shone through her first book *The Flower Master* (1982), is "pear-coloured, shedding that cool / Classical remorse over the angered field." I was enthusiastic about the elaborated conceits and sly sexual allegories, about the cool surfaces and angry undertow in that book, and I hoped for more depth, more density in her new book. Instead, we are given more difficulty. She remains a very private poet, and can be arch, but even at her most mysterious she is intriguing. I would say that the Martian influence on her fancy remains strong, if I did not have the feeling she might want to be known as a Venusian: "My sister planet has no moon, she travels all alone / Around the sun, while I am being the paperstainer." Venus, where biology is not cosmetic but cosmological, has softer edges than Mars, is better able to reveal the "disorder in desire" than to describe its causes and effects. One of her gorgeous *blasons*, "Sky-House," poses the world as a house, the house as a woman, and it ends this way:

There in the crimson, over-furnished drawing-room
You meet your match—a dayboy revisiting
The devastating banishment the summer
You're eleven, its transparency so often since
Misunderstood, abused: and do not argue
When I open presents provocatively
In front of you, resist the moon-watered
Tea I offer with one hand only,
Called improbably 'eyelashes of the swan.'

McGuckian is one of the youngest of (and the only prominent woman among) the so-called Belfast Group. Their dean is Seamus Heaney. *Station Island*¹¹ is his sixth collection, his most ambitious and, though a natural extension of earlier concerns, his most surprising book: "a sun-glare / to put out the small hearths of constancy." There are three sections, and the first is a little disappointing. Many of the poems are occasional, all are familiar. But even minor poems by Heaney are better than most poets at their best. Whom he once named his "guttural muse" still speaks for him, in lines like air-gemmed roots reaching deep into the language. There are few tones he can't strike. He can be elegiac or teasing or erotic, as he

¹⁰ VENUS AND THE RAIN, by Medbh McGuckian. Oxford University Press. \$8.95.

¹¹ STATION ISLAND, by Seamus Heaney. Farrar, Straus & Giroux. \$11.95.



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wishes. And sometimes all three, as when in “La Toilette” he describes a theology of the boudoir:

The white towelling bathrobe
ungirdled, the hair still wet,
first coldness of the underbreast
like a ciborium in the palm.

*Our bodies are the temples
of the Holy Ghost. Remember?*
And the little, fitted, deep-slit drapes
on and off the holy vessels

regularly? And the chasuble
so deftly hoisted? But vest yourself
in the word you taught me
and the stuff I love: slub silk.

Other poems in this section are in the more unbuttoned lines that *Field Work* (1979) introduced into his work. And here, as before, he seems something of a throwback, a pre-modernist like Yeats or Frost, who writes the old music, communal and resonant.

What is more surprising in this book are the poems in the third section, subtitled “Sweeney Redivivus.” That is to say, they are afterthoughts on *Sweeney Astray* (1983), his translation of the medieval Gaelic *Buile Suibhne*, that tells the story of Mad Sweeney, cursed by St. Ronan to wander the land in the form of a bird, or as what Heaney once described himself as being—“an inner émigré.” (It may be a good translation. I cannot tell. But it does not seem to me to be a great poem, even though the figure of Sweeney is commanding.) That Sweeney’s kingdom was in that part of northern Ireland where Heaney himself was raised, and that in fact their very names rhyme, led the poet to try poems “voiced for Sweeney” but often with modern or autobiographical settings. One of them, for instance, called “In the Beech,” takes the bird-man motif and crosses it with a memory of Heaney as a child, up in a tree, his “thick-tapped, soft-fledged, airy listening post,” near an air base in the 1940s. That much can be made out, but many of the other 19 poems in the series remain esoteric. I have not lived with the book long enough to figure them out; they represent an inward turn for Heaney, a kind of reverie that deliberately resists a reader. They are beautiful poems, nonetheless.

In his Introduction to *Sweeney Astray*, Heaney wrote that “insofar as Sweeney is also a figure of the artist, displaced, guilty, assuaging himself by his utterance, it is possible to read the work as an aspect of the quarrel between free creative imagination and the constraints of religious, political, and domestic obligation.” It is this same quar-



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rel that the twelve-part title sequence takes up. Since poems like "Punishment" in *North* (1975), Heaney has addressed the murderous political situation in Ireland. In *Field Work*, a book shot through with references to the *Inferno*, there is "The Strand at Lough Beg," "Triptych" and others, along with a strain of self-accusation for having aspired to a "kind, / Indifferent, faults-on-both-sides tact." And even in the initial poems in *Station Island*, it is clear that the poet's conscience is troubled—"fortified and bewildered," as he puts it in "Away from It All." "Chekhov on Sakhalin" worries the Russian's burden, "the burden of his freedom / To try for the right tone—not tract, not thesis— / And walk away from the floggings." "Sandstone Keepsake" and "Making Strange" are similarly beset. But it is "Station Island," a major poem by anyone's standards, that fully dramatizes the quarrel.

Station Island is a centuries-old penitential pilgrimage site on Lough Derg, where believers walk barefoot, for three days and while fasting, around "beds" or holy cells, and enact rituals of renunciation and repentance. It is the perfect setting for an examination of artistic conscience prompted by unease at good luck and bad faith. Sean O'Faolain, whose story "Lovers of the Lake" is set there, spoke of "its sense of remoteness from the world, almost a sensation of the world's death. It is the source of the island's kindness. Nobody is just matter, poor to be exploited by rich, weak to be exploited by strong; in mutual generosity each recognizes the other only as a form of soul." Heaney's poem begins and ends rather abruptly, and does not have as much apparatus as it might—doesn't, for example, make much use of its setting as a landscape. Instead, he has concentrated on a series of dream-encounters with revenants, figures from the past (William Carleton, Patrick Kavanagh, James Joyce) and figures from his own past (an old teacher, friends and relatives). It would be reductive to say that these encounters deal only with the issue of moral commitment and partisan activism. The quarrel is only dramatized, not resolved, and it also deals with Heaney's ties to the whole of Irish history, to the Catholic Church, and to literary traditions (the *Purgatorio* is a towering ghost that haunts this poem). Heaney would slyly agree with Carleton that "We are earthworms of the earth, and all that / has gone through us is what will be our trace." But it is Heaney's dilemma at having "no mettle for the angry note" that is most prominent. When he speaks with his murdered cousin, the exchange ends:

"I kept seeing a grey stretch of Lough Beg
and the strand empty at daybreak.
I felt like the bottom of a dried-up lake."

"You saw that, and you wrote that—not the fact.
You confused evasion and artistic tact."

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The Protestant who shot me through the head
 I accuse directly, but indirectly, you
 who now atone perhaps upon this bed
 for the way you whitewashed ugliness and drew
 the lovely blinds of the *Purgatorio*
 and saccharined my death with morning dew."

But Heaney gives the last word to Joyce, who admonishes the poet:
 "Your obligation / is not discharged by any common rite. / What
 you must do must be done on your own . . ." The sackcloth and
 ashes are for others: "Let go, let fly, forget."

You lose more of yourself than you redeem
 doing the decent thing. Keep at a tangent.
 When they make the circle wide, it's time to swim

out on your own and fill the element
 with signatures on your own frequency,
 echo soundings, searches, probes, allurements . . .

It may be the last word, but it is not the final word. Denials and
 evasions from earlier in the poem loom up behind these stanzas.
 Loyalties remain ensnared and divided. And that is as it should be.
 This is a complex, demanding, ravishing poem. Heaney has
 brought all of his skill to it, all of his understanding of history and
 his humane sympathies. And those extraordinary gifts would not be
 capable of an easy answer to the hard questions they ask. Because
 he asks them for us, *of* us as well, we are fortunate to have him
 writing among us.

(continued from page 146) *Notes on Contributors*

RICHARD KENNEY* is working on a book
 of poems and lives in Middletown
 Springs, Vermont.

BARBARA HOWES* has published two
 recent books: *Moving and The Road*
Commissioner & Other Stories.

Frost: A Literary Life Considered, by WIL-
 LIAM H. PRITCHARD, was recently pub-
 lished by Oxford University Press.

J.D. McCLATCHY teaches at Princeton
 and is Poetry Editor of *The Yale Review*.
 His new collection of poems, *Stars Prin-*
cipal, will be published later this year.

JAY PARINI, a Contributing Editor of the
New England Review, teaches at Middle-
 bury College.

MICHAEL GORRA is writing a book on
 Evelyn Waugh, Graham Greene, Henry
 Green, and Anthony Powell.

DEAN FLOWER teaches at Smith College
 and is currently at work on a book about
 Nabokov's fiction.

DERWENT MAY is Literary Editor of
 BBC's *The Listener*.

We are pleased to announce that Emily
 Grosholz, Assistant Professor of Philoso-
 phy at Pennsylvania State University, au-
 thor of *The River Painter*, and a frequent
 contributor to *The Hudson Review*, has
 been appointed an Advisory Editor.

*Asterisk indicates a new contributor.

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IN THIS ISSUE:

A couple of days ago, when I was uptown, I was waiting on the corner of Sixth Avenue and Forty-fifth Street for the lights to change when I became aware of the familiarity of the fat neck on the man in front of me. It was Edmund Wilson all right, and I walked part way across town with him, to the *New Yorker*. He has gotten fatter and much older, but was in one of his rare moods of affability, and kept telling me I ought to resurrect that old project of mine for an anthology of satirical poetry. I asked him if he had read Trilling's novel, remembering that he and Trilling don't get along, or at any rate, that Edmund is not fond of Trilling. "Dreadful! Shocking!" he began to mutter in that Princeton-Reginald Owen accent of his.

—Weldon Kees, letter to Norris Getty, p. 15.

Possibly more scandalous was the fact that Kingsley Amis' new novel, *Stanley and the Women*, was not even on the shortlist of the Booker Prize—and may I say that it is also a considerable shame that, as I write this, nine months after the novel was published, it has still not found a publisher in the States. The reason for this latter fact is said to be that female editors in American publishing houses are offended by it, and male editors are afraid that women won't read it.

—Derwent May, "Letter from London," p. 6.

Hudson Review readers who have seen *Amadeus* will not require elaborate explanations of why it is among the intolerable films of the year. I am willing, nay eager, to agree that there is no necessary connection between character and talent but no one can tell me that Mozart was the cackling imbecile he was in this movie represented as being by Tom Dulce, one of the worst new actors around. There is simply nothing to recommend this film except the music, *bien sur*, which in fact we can hear any day on the American Public Network.

—Vernon Young, "Of Mozart, Proust and Cambodia," p. 110.